

The Singularity of the Self

*The principles of personal identity in
Levinas' description of the pre-ethical level
of subjectivity*

Feroz Mehmood Shah



MA Thesis in Philosophy at IFIKK, HF

Supervisor: Arne Johan Vetlesen

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IV

Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas is commonly treated as a first and foremost ethical thinker. In this essay I want to offer an alternative reading of Levinas' first main work, *Totality and Infinity*, by shifting the attention from the singularity of the Other, to the singularity of the self. I will do this by presenting a reconstruction and analysis of the two main principles of personal identity that are to be found in the book. On the ground achieved by these analyses, I claim that Levinas is defending a "minimally existentialistic" self, an understanding of subjectivity that shares crucial premises with the existentialist tradition, even while criticising it. I also discuss the merits and limitations of the vitalistic vocabulary Levinas employs. Finally I claim that the great importance attributed to the subject in Levinas' philosophy, along with his understanding of the synthesis of the active and the passive characteristics of the subject, leads Levinas into an ambiguous understanding of the status of the singularity of the Other.

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Concerning citations

Most citations in this essay relate to the list of references attached after the essay. When referring to most French books and articles I often refer to both the English and the French edition. The page in the English edition is listed first, while the page of the French edition appears after the slash. Due to the amount of references, two books is simply denoted by the main letters in the books' titles. That concerns Emmanuel Levinas' book *Totality and Infinity*, which will be referred to as *TI*, and Martin Heidegger's book *Being and Time*, which will be referred to as *BT*. As for the quotations from Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, I refer to both the A- and B-edition.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The “minimally existentialistic” self

In Emmanuel Levinas' first major work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, he launches a dramatic attack on the history of western philosophy. Guided by the idea that this tradition is dominated by a tendency to totalisation – that is, favouring the general over the particular, or the universal over the singular – he wants to show that philosophy should rely on different premises than it has done so far. In fact, by proceeding with an immanent critique, he wants to show that the historical contributions to philosophy already rest on these premises, even though the philosophers themselves have failed to acknowledge it. These claims are rather sweeping, and anyone familiar with Levinas' work will recognise the, at times, tendentious diagnosis and dramatic tone that characterises his writing. But based upon his readings of the history of philosophy he builds an extensive understanding of metaphysics, which touches upon a wide range of philosophical topics, be it in epistemology, religion, language or ethics. In this essay I shall explicate the central argument of the book at hand, namely Levinas' notion of subjectivity. I will concern myself with the subject as Levinas discusses it in *Totality and Infinity* before he introduces the notion of responsibility, and I want to defend an understanding of this subject as a “minimally existentialistic” self. By the somewhat clumsy phrase “minimally existentialistic” my intention is to highlight the existential aspect of Levinas' description of the self, at the expense of the more metaphysically committing description of the self Levinas offers in relation to fecundity. The term existentialistic is not to be understood as coinciding with the sense in which Sartre and Heidegger uses it, but rather to consist in a set of premises they all have in common. The reading of *Totality and Infinity* offered in this essay will diverge from most presentations of Levinas' thought, since it won't be concerned with ethics and the singularity of the Other. In this essay, I will try to offer a coherent reading of Levinas' thoughts on the singularity of the self, and show how these thoughts share many premises with the existentialistic tradition. Towards the end of this introduction I will return to the phrase “minimally existentialistic” and describe the main characteristics of Levinas' account of subjectivity. But initially it is important to get a more general grasp of Levinas' project in the book, and make some methodological distinctions.

Levinas claims that the totalising manner in which philosophy has traditionally been conducted has led to conclusions that are not only phenomenologically inadequate, but also ethically insufficient. He tries to explicate this by showing how a number of situations and objects that have hitherto been deemed unphilosophical, in fact provide the basis for philosophy. As this is first and foremost a work of phenomenology, Levinas tries to rework the notion of phenomena so that it can include these situations and objects, and he goes on to describe how they disrupt any philosophical system that tries to exclude them. These disruptive objects or situations occur in different guises in Levinas' works, but the most known is perhaps associated by the notions of 'the Other' or 'the Face'. However, it can also be recognised in the notion of 'there is' and in his phenomenological description of different existentials, such as of insomnia. The particular trait that characterises all of them is that they are irreducibly singular, and thus cannot be totalised. Our main task in this essay is to see how Levinas claims that the subject is primarily characterised as a singularity through a set of principles of identity. But in order to get a proper grasp of Levinas' philosophical project and his conception of the history of philosophy and of what is at stake, we need to consider briefly a few key concepts of his philosophy. I will do this by highlighting some of the important points offered in the important preface to *Totality and Infinity*. The preface is the only place in the book where Levinas explicitly discusses methodology and this is where he introduces several of the concepts and themes that will be important in the subsequent chapters of the book. Without the context established by the preface, it is easy to lose sight of the overall aim of the book.

1.2 The situation of philosophy

A peculiarity of the preface is that Levinas begins by describing a situation that he does not return to until the later parts of the book, and then only for a few chapters. This situation is that of war. This is one of the first major claims in the book, and it guides Levinas' outlook on the history of philosophy. He describes our tendency to totalisation as war and violence, and sees this as posing a threat to morality: "The state of war suspends morality; it divests the eternal institutions and obligations of their eternity and rescinds ad interim the unconditional imperatives" (TI, 21/5) It is not just any morality that is in question, but a morality with eternal institutions and obligations and unconditional imperatives. Even though this is not an essay on ethics, it should be noted here that Levinas seems to argue for a sort of ethical

realism, which claims that we relate to the world and other beings as having a meaning and value that is not bestowed upon them by us. We are always already engaged in relations that guides us and demand reactions from us. But for now it is important to clarify what kind of war Levinas is talking about here. Much has been written on the relation between Levinas' philosophy and the events that shook Europe in the twentieth century¹, and by talking about war, he is, without doubt, referring to concrete military war, to armed conflict. But there is also a metaphorical dimension to his use of the notion of war, namely as violence in its broader sense, and perhaps foremost, the violence of the philosophical thought. The core of this claim is that a certain comportment of reason – which Levinas names “politics” – drives it to complete itself, at whatever cost: “The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté” (TI, 21/5). For Levinas this is most apparent in the way epistemological presuppositions have regulated philosophical endeavours in a manner that excludes a wide range of questions. It should be underlined that Levinas, by criticising the exercise of reason, is not taking an irrationalist stand, rather he is criticising a philosophical bias in favour of the theoretical. Levinas is of course not the only one to criticise the prioritisation of the theoretical in philosophy, and among his associates at this point are Martin Heidegger and the existentialist tradition, with whom he often engages. The theoretical bias is one of the most important ways in which the tendency to totalisation is expressed, and which is discernible in the philosophical striving towards systematisation. Levinas' question might be formulated like this: Is it possible that a certain way of exercising philosophical reason might lead to the ignorance of certain premises that underlies all thought and which again leads to morally inadequate consequences? Levinas answers this question with an unambiguous affirmation, and the premise that is most extensively discussed in *Totality and Infinity* is that nature of subjectivity. Grounded on a reinterpretation of subjectivity, Levinas then goes on to readdress the different relations the subject engages in, among them the relation with ‘the Other’.

If a certain form of philosophising is to be understood as violent in the metaphorical sense, and the subject is among the threatened, what is the manner of this violence? At the core of this threat is the subject's sense of identity. This topic is first discussed in terms of peace, and

¹ Levinas comments upon this in a interview with Philippe Nemo, named “Secrecy and Freedom”. The interview is reproduced in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 17. printing (2009).

Levinas draws an important distinction between two types of peace, namely “the peace of empires” and “messianic peace”. The former is the result of war: “The peace of empires issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity” (TI, 22/6). What is threatened by totalising philosophy is the way it understands the subject, and the manner in which this subject’s identity is constituted. I want to argue that Levinas offers multiple principles of self-identification, apparent in the different relations the subject engages in. The problem with the peace that follows after totalising philosophy is not that the subjects have no identity, but rather that the identity is bestowed upon them. This is most apparent in theories in which the subject is understood in light of a structural whole it takes part in, a whole which is greater than the subject itself. Levinas emphatically expresses the violence he claims the subject is submitted to: “a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity, a mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is no escape” (TI, 21/6). What Levinas is challenging is not the value of explaining human behaviour – it should be obvious that there are multiple occasions in which such explanations are essential – but that this should not replace the subject’s identity which has its origin in the subject itself. The “messianic” peace Levinas defends tries to restore this latter kind of identity, and the first part of *Totality and Infinity* is dedicated to this topic. By way of existential analyses, Levinas shows how this identity is irreducible given that we accept the first-person perspective. In this essay, this identity is first examined in terms of *psychism*, which shows how personal identity is derived from the subject’s self-relation. Then it is examined in terms of *enjoyment*, which is the identity that is developed through the subject’s world-relations. The third important relation, the relation to the Other, or to Infinity, will be discussed only briefly in this essay, and then mainly as a contrast to the other relations. The identity of the subject is one of the core ideas of Levinas’ ethical thought, but apart from the question of how the subject relates to the Other, and the related question of whether the signification of the Other results from an analogy from the self or by revelation, the questions of morality is beyond the scope of this essay.

1.3 A defence of subjectivity

At this point we might ask ourselves why Levinas is so concerned with safeguarding an existentialistic or vitalistic understanding of the subject. In what way does his understanding of personal identity rebut the violence he claims is inherent in the more objective

understanding of the subject? The theme of war and violence strikes a dramatic tone that pervades the work, something which has inspired many readers to highlight the ethical questions the book raises. In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas expresses a similarly dramatic motivation for his thought. On a question concerning the inspiration from Bergson in his work, he claims that it is particularly apparent in “the fear of being in a world without novel possibilities, without a future of hope, a world where everything is regulated in advance; to the ancient fear before fate, be it that of a universal mechanism, absurd fate, since what is going to pass has in a sense already passed” (Levinas 2009, 28). But Levinas is also motivated by more subtle and metaphysical reasons, to which he devotes major parts of the book. By defending the irreducibility of the personal identity, he claims that it is a necessary condition for understanding human action, a notion that Levinas understands in a quite broad sense. What is at stake in Levinas philosophy may be understood in light of his implicit claim that how we understand being in general and the human being in particular, guides our understanding of morality. Only insofar as we properly understand the subject, may we achieve an adequate understanding of morality. Levinas’ defence of the minimally existentialistic account of the subject leads him to readdress a wide range of philosophical questions, among them the notion of truth and the relation between theory and practice. Most of the questions he raises are already thematised by his own philosophical generation, and the generation of their teachers. Thus, the most prominent voices in Levinas’ book are those of Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, but the inspiration of a wide range of philosophers – among them Plato, Kant and the German Idealists, Bergson and Rosenzweig – resonates in the text.

The different philosophical influences constitute a problem for anyone who engages in a close reading of Levinas’ work, as he only on a few occasions explicitly refers to the philosophers he engages with, even though the tone of his discussion is often polemical. For the reader it is often essential to identify the philosopher in question in order to properly understand the content and extension of Levinas’ claims. In this essay I will only identify the references on those occasions where such an explication importantly contributes to the topic at hand, and then, it will mainly be limited to the three former philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre.

1.4 Terminological distinctions: “Same/Other”, “interiority/exteriority”

Before we continue and address the question of subjectivity, it is important to examine another few concepts that Levinas introduces in the preface and which constitute the key concepts of his work. These are two interrelated pairs of concepts which are used in a somewhat ambiguous sense throughout the text. The first pair is that of “the Same” and “the Other” and is a well-known part of the philosophical vocabulary that has its roots in Plato’s dialogue *The Sophist*. It is related to the other pair of concept, that of “interiority” and “exteriority”, which is forcefully given philosophical signification by Levinas in this work. Levinas introduces the concepts of exteriority, the Same and the Other in a phrase where he expounds the consequences of totalisation and war: “It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the Same” (TI, 21/6). The Same is primarily to be understood as the human subject, more specifically the “I” of philosophy. The Same constitutes the point of departure for Levinas’ philosophy, a premise importantly influenced by Husserl’s phenomenological investigations and Heidegger’s claim that any philosophy has to take its course through the understanding of Dasein – Heidegger’s critical understanding of the human subject². The notion of the Same as the “I” might be understood in two different senses: a limited and a broader sense. *Totality and Infinity* is written as a pseudo-genealogical³ account of the self. This self is initially shown to be enclosed in its own world, a separation which is important for Levinas’ metaphysical project. Subsequently this self is shown to relate to the world, but only insofar as it answers the self’s needs. At this point the world is disclosed as something available to the subject, ready to be represented or consumed.

² I will continue to use Heidegger’s term ‘Dasein’, when discussing his philosophy, but will be using the term ‘subject’ when discussing Levinas’ philosophy, as he refutes multiple of the premises and conclusions of Heidegger’s criticism of the historical understanding of subjectivity. When the discussion requires me to treat the two positions simultaneously, I will treat the terms as synonyms.

³ This term is intended to capture Levinas’ way of presenting his argument, which is written as a genealogy. The prefix pseudo- is to capture the sense in which this does not constitute a proper genealogy, but is rather to be understood as a narrative style, moving from simpler descriptions to more complex ones. In *Totality and Infinity* he starts by understanding the subject as psychism, moves on to understand it as enjoyment, before ending up in a full-blown ethical subjectivity. Such a genealogical approach is even more apparent in his earlier works, such as *Time and the Other*, where Levinas shows how a subject that is ethically responsible raises up from an existence that is anonymous – the Levinasian *il y a*. Such an approach is called *pseudo-genealogical*, as Levinas claims that these analyses are supposed to show different layers of subjectivity, all present at the same time. But by analysing them separately, he can show how they contribute differently to the constitution of the subject, and how these different layers are interrelated.

This leads to a broader notion of the Same – the “I” and the world to the extent the “I” relates to it in this manner, which Levinas describes as egoistic. The term “the Same”, is closely related to this understanding of the self, but Levinas often uses it in two distinguishable senses. The Same can on the one hand be understood as a force which organises the world around itself, but on the other hand, it can also be understood as both including the “I” as this force *and* the world as already organised. The two distinguishable notions –the Same as a force or as a field – are expressed interchangeably by the same term, without the distinction being pointed out. The notion of the Same is contrasted with the notion of the Other [*Autre*] which is intended to distinguish a radical alterity. The other par excellence is the human Other [*Autrui*]. One of the crucial questions of Levinas’ philosophy is whether the Same – the subject – may engage in a relation with the other – primarily as another human being – without undermining its radical alterity. Is it possible for the philosophising “I” to relate to another human being, without reducing the other to its understanding of itself, or without including this other in the world as organised at will? In this essay I will – with the intention of clarification – replace the ambiguous term of “the Same” with the terms “I”, “self” and “subject”, which will be used interchangeably. These terms are all intended to highlight the personal or singular aspect of the human being, and will be developed throughout the essay. At this point it is also important to repeat a question that has already been introduced above, and which will be discussed later in the essay, namely the question of whether the other is to be understood as a revelation or as an analogy from the self. Is the irreducible identity of the self and the irreducible alterity of the Other comparable? The problem lies in that while the notion of identity has a more univocal sense – it is the identity produced by the subject itself – the notion of alterity is more ambiguous. On the one hand it might be understood as being produced in the relation between the subject and the Other – thus highlighting Levinas’ implicit claim that any philosophical claim takes its course through the subject – while on the other hand it might be understood as being produced by the Other’s self-expression – thus highlighting the similarity between identity and alterity as the notion of identity as self-identity is often described as being able to raise one’s voice and to protest. The question might then be raised in another manner: Is it possible that the protestation of the self – which Levinas’ describes as egoistic – is also a protestation in defence of the Other? I will return to these questions towards the end of this essay.

The second pair of concepts, closely related to the first, is that of “interiority” and “exteriority”. These terms are initially to be understood in relation to a system, or an

organised field. As such, they express one of the essential aspects of Levinas' understanding of the history of philosophy. The tendency to totalisation, Levinas claims, has its basis in that a system tries to incorporate as much as possible into its organised account. Such a system becomes a problem at the moment it tries to include those things that cannot adequately be incorporated in this account. In the Levinasian history of philosophy, Hegel's philosophy of the spirit is the prime example of such a totalising account. As a contrast to interiority, exteriority is that which remains on the outside of the system. But interiority is also used two more distinguishable senses, closely related to the two senses of the Same. On the one hand it might be understood as the inner life of the "I" – what we have called psychism – and on the other hand it might be understood in the broader sense in which the "I" engages with the world, thus being close to what Husserl tried to express with his notion of Life-World and Heidegger with his notion of Being-in-the-world. In this essay I will only use interiority to express the inner life of the subject, and it will be used interchangeably with, in addition to other terms, psychism. As for the notion of exteriority, I will generally use it to refer to entities that are not the object of representation or construction, and I will refer to the Other with the term "radical exteriority".

Even though the dualistic terms we have just discussed might seem to endorse a Cartesian dualism between the Ego and the world, this is not the case, since Levinas is informed both by Husserl's phenomenological critique of this dualism by his concept of intentionality, and Heidegger's radicalisation of this critique by his concept of Being-in-the-world. But this matter is complicated by the fact that Levinas wants to show the limits of the intentional mode of relating to the world – as it cannot adequately relate to the Other – and of Heidegger's analysis of Being-in-the-world – as it upholds a subject which is too involved in the world. There is a dualism in Levinas' philosophy, but that is not between the "I" and the world, but between "I" and the Other. This dualism is not a substance dualism, but a phenomenological one, intended to highlight the presence and reality of entities that cannot be approached intentionally – the Other – and the personal identity of the self, which distinguishes it from the world it is still always engaged in. This latter aspect will be discussed as separation, closely interrelated with identity.

1.5 A proper understanding of transcendence

A final term has to be introduced as it reoccurs innumerable times in Levinas' philosophy, and that is the notion of transcendence. The notion of transcendence he wishes to defend is often discussed in terms of eschatology, but Levinas quickly brushes aside any association this word may conjure to the religious ideas of the Apocalypse or the teleological ideas of the end of history. Rather it is intended to express the breach with the totalising tendency. Levinas introduces the idea of transcendence as eschatology in order to distinguish between two concepts of transcendence. On the one hand it is transcendence in the minor sense as the transcendence of the subject towards a world. Even though the philosophy is replete with philosophical accounts of such transcendence, Levinas claims that it is inadequate as it is limited by either the self's organisation of the world, as expressed in classical German idealism, or by being conditioned by a preceding organising principle, as Heidegger's account of Being. The proper understanding of transcendence, on the other hand, is intended to capture a way in which the self may relate to the Other, without undermining its alterity. This notion of transcendence is closely related to Levinas' idea of Infinity, which he derives from Descartes' third meditation. He describes this in metaphorical terms: "It is a relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality*, as though the objective totality did not fill out the true measure of being, as though another concept, the concept of *infinity*, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality, non-encompassable within a totality and as primordial as totality" (TI, 22/7) The relation to the Other, understood in light of the idea of Infinity, is characterised by being a relation to something that cannot adequately be encompassed by thought. Even though Levinas borrows the notion of Infinity from Descartes, it is clear that it is intended to serve a different purpose. For instead of trying to prove God's existence, Levinas wants to defend the claim that there are such things that we do have an idea of, but which always exceeds the idea we have of it. This is not to be understood in the limited sense in which we approach objects; we have to approach it repeatedly in order to adequate our idea of it. Rather, it is to be understood in a more radical sense since, in so far as we talk about the Other as the human Other, we are talking about an entity which can express itself and defend its expression; or as Levinas would say it in describing his peculiar term "the face": "[it is the] exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentations of realities simply given" (TI, 202/221).

By claiming the reality of such entities that are inexplicable in relation to a totality understood as a systematic or contextually determining whole, Levinas engages himself in a discussion that is broader than a specifically ethical one. It is essentially a particular view of the subject

he wants to defend, a view that does not give prevalence to theoretical and epistemological presupposition. Rather it is a subject which engages with the world in a practical way, but which yet retains a separation from the world it engages in. This essay will centre the question of separation, which Levinas interprets as concerning personal identity. The Levinasian notion of transcendence is supposed to capture the way in which such a separate subject relates to radical exteriority – a relation which stands as the motivation for Levinas' philosophy.

1.6 Method and intention

The larger part of the extensive literature on Levinas mainly discusses his contribution to philosophical ethics. This is justified by the fact that Levinas' writings are full of discussions of ethical questions and that *Totality and Infinity* itself is characterised with an ethical vocabulary. In this essay I want to deviate from the common way of analysis, and offer an alternative approach to Levinas' thought. What I shall do is to take a step back and examine the arguments he uses to prepare the ground for his fully worked out and properly ethical thoughts. Based on the assumption that Levinas, rather than offering a particular ethics in *Totality and Infinity*, shows us how ethics is a dimension that pervades all philosophical investigations, I want to examine how the notions of the identity and separation of the subject is developed, as these notions play a crucial role in Levinas' thoughts on the ethical relation between the subject and the Other. But the notion of ethics used in Levinas' sense is different from the way ethics is usually understood, both in meta-ethical and in normative discussions. Ethics, in Levinas' work, is rather to be understood in light of core philosophical problems, whose relevance is broader than ethics, such as the role and limits of our theoretical and practical relations to the world. I agree with Simon Critchley in that to the degree Levinas' work is an ethics, it is a sort of proto-ethics⁴: "he is seeking to give an account of a basic

⁴ Critchley himself does not use the phrase, but it occurs in several places in the commentary literature on Levinas, but is used in two different main senses. John Llewelyn uses this phrase throughout his book *The Genealogy of Ethics*, in order to distinguish Levinas' sense of ethics from the more traditional way of understanding ethics. Proto-ethics thus encompasses the whole of Levinas' thought as it is expressed in *Totality and Infinity*, as the ethical – the relation with infinity or the Other – pervades both epistemological and ontological considerations. Thus, proto-ethics understood in this sense understands Levinas' philosophy as exploring the ground of ethics in its traditional sense, but without offering a distinct normative theory itself. Diane Perpich uses the term in a different sense in her work *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*. Here the term

existential demand, a lived fundamental obligation that should be at the basis of all moral theory and moral action” (Critchley 2002, 28).

My effort to examine one of the major preconditions for Levinas metaphysical thoughts, namely the notion the identity of the subject will be done by offering a close reading of Levinas’ first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, and this book constitutes the limits of the investigation. This methodological approach is motivated both by a sense of lack in the already existing commentaries of the book, and by the nature of Levinas’ book itself. Anyone familiar with Levinas’ writings easily recognises his hyperbolic style and sweeping analysis. As the former to some extent serves the philosophical purpose of avoiding essentialistic claims concerning the Other and the idea of Infinity, the language will often seem misplaced and inappropriate if we lose this purpose out of sight. I will avoid using his hyperbolic language, and will only refer to it when I intend to highlight what purpose it serves. As for the sweeping analyses, I intend to place several of his arguments within their appropriate philosophical context. By choosing a close reading, it is easier to identify the context of the arguments at hand, something that is not exactly helped by the fact that Levinas seldom refers directly to the philosophers he engages with. I want to make these discussions more explicit, and this will on some occasions mean that I will limit the scope of Levinas’ arguments. On other occasions, his arguments will be shown to have an impact beyond what is apparent from the text itself. It should be noted that identifying the quotes and references latent in *Totality and Infinity* is an immense task, and a systematic account of these references would go beyond what is possible in this essay. I will only try to explicate the reference on the occasions when Levinas touches upon the key topics of this essay, namely those of subjectivity, and then it is primarily limited to the philosophy of Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger and Sartre.

Another asset of the close reading is that it more easily allows us to understand *Totality and Infinity* as offering a coherent argument, rather than simply a series of loosely connected arguments. Depending on whether – or in what way – one sees the different sections of the

proto-ethics designates what is explored before the ethical meeting with the Other in Levinas pseudo-geneological account of subjectivity and our existence in the world. Here proto-ethics thus encompasses, among others, the notions of psychism, enjoyment, dwelling and the discrete other. In this essay, I use the term in its former sense. The term “meta-ethics” could have been used, but as Levinas’ interests to a significant degree diverge from what is often associated with meta-ethics, such a use seems inappropriate.

book as interrelated, the thoughts offered in the book might be interpreted in different ways. The choice of examining the notion of subjectivity is guided by a remark Levinas offers in the preface, where he claims that the book is a defence of subjectivity (TI, 26/11). It should be noted that even though I understand *Totality and Infinity* primarily to be concerned with this notion of subjectivity, that does not mean that Levinas is not addressing other important issues. Of these, I will argue that the most central ones are those that attempt to explicate in what way we might think alterity in a way that does not undermine this alterity, and in elucidating his notion of Infinity. But both of these issues are guided by an overarching task Levinas seems to have set himself, namely the attempt to reassess some of the fundamental assumptions of the Husserlian phenomenology and the philosophical tradition of which phenomenology itself is a part. The way he goes about this task is, as he specifies in the preface, through the phenomenological method. By attempting to broaden the scope of phenomenology by using the joint method of descriptions and transcendental arguments, he takes as his point of departure the notion of subjectivity and the directly related notion of consciousness. Thus, even though Levinas addresses multiple issues, they all seem to be bound to the fundamental question of how the human subject should be understood. By placing the arguments offered in the book in the philosophical tradition of subjectivity, I therefore, contrary to the bulk of the vast literature on Levinas, intend to argue that the main issue of the book is not strictly ethical.

The main task of this essay is to examine and explicate the different ways in which the identity of the self is constituted, and the different distinctive traits this entails for the subject. Closely related to the question of identity is the correlation between the dependency and independency of the subject. This correlation is intended to capture the way the subject is both limited by facticity, yet retains a separation, which is expressed through spontaneity and freedom. Through explicating this core issue, a number of questions arise, which I will deal with systematically in order to see in what way they relate to the issue of subjectivity. Among these is the question of how Levinas' conception of our being in the world, differ from Heidegger and Sartre. How does Levinas describe our being in the world compared to Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit* and Sartre's notion of facticity? A related question is how Levinas criticises the existentialistic notion of authenticity and tone and pathos of the existentialist writings. I want to show how closely Levinas' notion of subjectivity often comes to several of the core existentialist claims, yet in what important ways he diverges from existentialism as a whole.

There are multiple premises that constitute the important background for Levinas' work and that are shared with amongst others, Heidegger and Sartre, and that warrants the term existentialistic as a description of Levinas' philosophy. First of all, they all claim that there is something distinct about the human being which separates it from the being of everything else. Secondly, they deny Husserl's attempt to work out a pure phenomenology and his *epoché*, by claiming that there cannot be a consciousness divested of a world. A third claim follows from the second, and that is that the human subject is always already engaged in the world that it is located in. A detached perspective on the subject in question is unachievable. Fourthly, and finally, as a consequence of these claims, they all consider the proper approach to understanding the human subject to be that of analysing concrete experiences. With these general similarities in place, there are some crucial differences that warrant the qualification *minimally* existentialistic. As will be apparent, Levinas refuses to accept the claim that the subject is characterised by a concern for itself. Similarly he dismisses the notion of authenticity, claiming that it validates egoism, and tries to reorient the important questions of philosophy to be that of the concern for the Other. This leads to a different vocabulary and pathos, which distinguish Levinas' writings. Furthermore, Levinas is not concerned with the question of alienation of the world, but rather tries to show how we are at home in the world we inhabit. And finally, rather than claiming that the subject's temporality indicates the dislocation of the subject – the way the subject is characterised by a non-coinciding with itself – he claims that the subject is coinciding through the principles of identity and separation. All of these questions will be thoroughly discussed throughout the essay, but a final remark is in order concerning the term vitalistic. I will sometimes use the term “existentialistic” and “vitalistic” interchangeably, as they both denote a set of issues. By the term “vitalistic” I am not referring to the metaphysical thesis about the organisation of living and non-living beings. Rather, I am using it in the same sense as Charles Larmore does in his book *The Practices of the Self*, as denoting a specific vocabulary in describing the subject – a vocabulary of “life” and of “living”. Such a vocabulary pervades Levinas' writings, and coincides with the existentialistic premises outlined above.

The main task of this essay is thus to offer a coherent reading of the notion of the singularity of the self in Levinas' work *Totality and Infinity*. Even though this investigation is limited to the singularity of the self, at the cost of the singularity of the Other, I want to introduce this latter notion towards the end of the essay, in order to show the impact the notion of the singularity of the self may have on the ethical readings of Levinas. This latter discussion will

of course be quite limited, as it is a topic that has been widely discussed and that alone would make up a complete thesis, but I consider the value of discussing these two notions together to justify these limitations.

2 Levinas' approach to philosophy

2.1 A transcendental method

In the introduction, we looked at some of the claims Levinas puts forth in *Totality and Infinity*, and we shall now briefly examine how he intends to defend those claims. Levinas' remarks about methodology are sparse, but he does discuss it explicitly at one point in the preface. There he makes it clear that he will follow a method that might be described as transcendental: "the way we are describing to work back and remain this side of objective certitude resembles what has come to be called the transcendental method (in which the technical procedures of transcendental idealism need not necessarily be comprised)" (TI, 25/10). In the quote Levinas offers some explanation of what he considers a transcendental method to be, but some further comments should be made. First of all, when Levinas says he will use a transcendental method, I understand this to mean that he will offer transcendental arguments. In my understanding of the core of a transcendental argument, I follow Robert Stern and Charles Taylor. According to Stern, the transcendental argument proposes necessary conditions to the possibility of some state of affairs: "The first, and perhaps the most definitive feature, is that these arguments involve a claim of a distinctive form: namely, that one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former. In suggesting that X is a condition for Y in this way, this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and a priori, and not merely natural and a posteriori" (Stern 2007, 3). Put into words more fitting for our task: by a transcendental argument a philosopher presents a generally accepted situation or state of affairs, and subsequently searches for the necessary preconditions for the possibility of this situation. Multiple other possible criteria for transcendental arguments are suggested, but following the multiplicity of strategies used by the diverse philosophers who have utilised such arguments – among others Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and more recently Putnam and Davidson – these are not considered to be constitutive of a transcendental argument (Stern 2007, 2–3). One trait that I want to highlight is that transcendental arguments usually take their starting point from experience, and the arguably most paradigmatic transcendental argument, Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories, is an example of this. By departing from a private or shared experience, the transcendental argument is usually understood as an attempt to rebut the sceptic, by only taking for granted that which also the sceptic might accept (Stern 2007,

4). Levinas' transcendental arguments also takes its departure from experience, and then often from the first-person perspective. But rather than applying this strategy in order to argue against a sceptic, Levinas considers it to follow from his phenomenological commitments to concrete experience. Taylor offers some further qualifications which limit the scope of the argument in a way that seems to apply to Levinas. Taylor's general understanding of the transcendental arguments is quite similar to Stern's, but the terms he uses are different: "The arguments I want to call 'transcendental' start from some feature of our experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or the subject's position in the world. They make this move by a regressive argument, to the effect that the stronger conclusion must be so if the indubitable fact about experience is to be possible" (Taylor 1997, 20). But, Taylor claims, these arguments do not defend an ontological thesis, but rather a thesis about self-understanding: They say something "about the nature of our life as subjects" (Ibid., 26), or, as he puts it later, "about the subject of experience and the subject's place in the world" (Ibid., 33). Thus, adapted to Levinas' philosophy, the transcendental arguments do not aim at proving the sceptic wrong, but rather showing the form any account about the subject must take, given that we accept the first-person perspective. The limited scope of Levinas' argument will be discussed further in the subsequent chapter.

2.2 A phenomenological method

In the preface Levinas offers another remark about methodology where he specifies that he will follow a phenomenological method. Levinas' close relation to the texts of Husserl and Heidegger indicates an affinity with phenomenological questions, as does much of his terminology. But already from the start it is apparent that Levinas will diverge, as does Heidegger, from the traditional Husserlian phenomenology's preoccupation with intentionality: "[T]he presentation and the development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thought aiming at objects! What counts is

the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives” (TI, 28/14). What Levinas does in the paragraph at hand is to introduce a distinction between the letter and the spirit of Husserl’s texts. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas turns his attention towards those “forgotten” experiences, which we should not understand as objects in the proper phenomenological sense. These experiences will be treated in this essay in terms of psychism and enjoyment and we will examine the broad spectre of experiences that constitutes our sense of identity. By this move, Levinas is situated closer to Heidegger’s account of phenomenology than Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. The closeness to Heidegger’s philosophy is most apparent if this is understood as an existential phenomenology, rather than an ontological phenomenology. Much of Levinas’ philosophy is directed as a criticism of this latter form of phenomenology, which he claims gives prevalence to a general idea of Being, rather than particular beings. I will not discuss this polemic further, but rather turn my attention towards the difference between existential and transcendental phenomenology. An existential phenomenology understands the subject as a being that is already in the world, rather than as a transcendental ego that is, somehow, radically outside the world. Such an existential phenomenology offers an analysis of the ways of being in the world, and thus understands the subject as something that is already engaged by a certain interrelation with the world. This account of the task of phenomenology stands in a sharp contrast to Husserl’s traditional phenomenology as it appears in his *Ideas* and *Cartesian Meditation*, which rather offers analysis of the pure consciousness, without regard to any relation to the world or indeed to whether it is a human consciousness or not (CM, 25–26).

2.3 Levinas’ arguments

There is an affinity between the phenomenological and the transcendental approach, apparent in that fact that Levinas always moves from concrete experience to the conditions of that experience. But anyone familiar with the text will recognise that it is not a text that continuously moves “backwards” towards increasingly fundamental structures and conditions. Rather the text is written as if there are certain situations which breaks with the continuous life we live, and which expose a more fundamental level of subjectivity on which our experiences and the concrete situation in which we find ourselves seem to rest. This ground is a minimal notion of subjectivity, to which he adds further characteristics until he ends up with a full-blown notion of subjectivity. This rebuilding is written in a narrative style that has been

described as pseudo-genealogical. The different characteristics are not to be understood as being developed at chronologically different points in a subject's life, but are rather to be understood as being present at all times. The pseudo-genealogical account is rather to capture different levels of complexity. But it should be underlined that Levinas never defends a notion of a minimal self, which would constitute a unified point from which every other characteristic of subjectivity is derived. Rather he wants to show how the different characteristics of subjectivity are co-dependent. The reconstruction of the notion of subjectivity is motivated by the need to adequately account for the experiences of rupture, which have already briefly been introduced as the relation to the elements and the Other, and of experiences such as insomnia.

Throughout the book Levinas offers multiple arguments in which the development of different characteristics of subjectivity is shown to be necessary. Two of those who offer a transcendental reading of Levinas and who bring forth different transcendental arguments in his work are Leora Batnitzky and Theodore de Boer. Batnitzky highlights the way the ethical, in Levinas' special understanding of it, constitutes a transcendental condition for his notion of subjectivity: "*Totality and Infinity*'s structure suggests a transcendental argument of sorts. If we take as true the description of the separable self, then we must recognize that the separable subject is made possible only by way of its relationship to the face of another" (Batnitzky 2007 ,40). de Boer, on the other hand, understands Levinas' philosophy to be a philosophy of dialogue: "Dialogue is the transcendental framework for the intentional relation to the world or, in Buber's terms, the I-Thou relationship is the transcendental condition for the I-It relationship" (de Boer 1997, 1–2). Even though I consider both of these arguments to be proper transcendental arguments present in Levinas' work, I will here limit myself to those arguments concerned with the notion of subjectivity. This means that arguments concerning infinity and ethics to a large degree will be excluded, unless they contribute to the question of subjectivity. The motivation for such a limitation is that subjectivity always seems to constitute the point of departure for the other arguments. It is the first-person perspective which constitutes the framework of *Totality and Infinity*, and most of the arguments of the book rest on a proper understanding of Levinas' notion of subjectivity.

3 Psychism, or the inner life

In this section I want to examine the first trait of subjectivity Levinas introduces, and that is the inner life of the subject, or psychism, which is to be understood as the self-relation of the subject. In the next chapter I will examine another two traits of subjectivity, those of enjoyment and dwelling, which concern the subject's world-relations. I want to analyse the way these relations develop a sense of personal identity for the self, which constitutes the singularity of the self. What is characteristic for all of these relations is their concreteness, which is clearly expressed by Levinas' vitalistic or existentialistic way of describing the matter. As such, they constitute a manifest contrast to the formalism of transcendental subjectivity, the manner in which, as Levinas claims, the subject is understood by Kant and Husserl. While explicating this notion of identity through concrete relations, we will on several occasions return to the discussion between formalism and non-formalism. But it is important to note that Levinas is working from the basic existentialistic premise that every account of the subject is an account of a worldly subject, and that it must hence take into consideration the manner of our existence. While Levinas' thoughts on psychism to a large degree share certain fundamental premises with the philosophy of Heidegger, the notion of enjoyment and dwelling are rather intended to either modify or replace certain Heideggerian notions related to our being in the world. One of the core arguments that run through the treatment of psychism, enjoyment and dwelling is the way in which they manifest the separation of the subject. The correlation between separation and identity is one of Levinas' main claims in the book, and place him in the tradition of Descartes, Kant and Husserl, all of whom argue for an absolute, separable self. But the comparison between these philosophers is only valid with major modifications. First of all, as the analysis of psychism shows, Levinas claims that the self-relation of this separable self is not a relation of knowledge, but is rather to be understood as lived. Second of all, as the subsequent analysis of enjoyment will show, this separation is not to be understood as self-sufficiency, as the subject is rather to be understood as "living off" the world. Lastly, this separation and the correlated identity is not a static trait which characterises the subject, but is conditioned by concrete events, be it the activity of the subject in psychism, or the passivity and receptivity in enjoyment. What is at stake for Levinas with the notion of separation is his understanding of metaphysics, which presupposes an absolute separation between the two terms of the metaphysical relation – the

Same and the Other. In the following I want to examine how this separation is positively produced, and how this separation also constitutes the identity of the subject.

3.1 The notion of psychism

Levinas endorses multiple separable notions of personal identity in *Totality and Infinity*, all of which have the common trait that the identity in question cannot be reduced to a set of formal qualities. Rather, the notions of identity are to be understood as the result of concrete relations. This is where Levinas' vitalistic or existentialistic approach to the subject becomes apparent, for the identity is constituted by the content of the subject's experiences, rather than by a formal quality which can be attributed to the experiences: "To be I [moi] is, over and beyond any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one's content. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is primal identity, the primordial work of identification" (TI, 36/25). Psychism is the inner life of a subject with its plurality of thoughts and subjective experiences, unified by the subject's fundamental temporality and its sense of personal time. By this inner life, we encounter Levinas' first principle of personal identity. This identification is not a way the subject represents itself to itself, nor is it an act of cognition; it is rather to be understood as a lived experience. On the one hand it is the way the subject knits together past, present and future to a story – or a life – it claims to be its own, and on the other hand it is the experience that I cannot but live my life. As I want to show in the examinations to follow, these two descriptions of the identity by inner life complement each other, and are both founded on what Levinas, following Heidegger's philosophy, claims is the fundamental temporality of the subject. The former description is examined by Levinas as the temporality of the subject,⁵ while the latter is exposed through a number of existential analyses Levinas' offers throughout his works.⁶

⁵ The temporality of the subject is a theme that Levinas discusses with multiple philosophers, and not only Heidegger. Both Husserl's and Bergson's thought on time constitute essential contributions to Levinas' philosophy. Bergson and Heidegger will be discussed further in the essay, while Husserl's thoughts on time-consciousness have to be omitted due to the limited scope of this essay.

⁶ Of the most famous of these analyses is to be found in Levinas' early work, *On Escape*, first published in 1935.

In describing the notion of psychism, Levinas uses a series of different terms, such as ‘thought’, ‘soul’, ‘the I’, ‘inner life’, and even ‘interiority’. The relation between these terms is not obvious, as Levinas often uses them in multiple senses. Some further explication thus seems to be appropriate. The main issue rises in relation to the ambiguous sense of the term ‘interiority’, which was discussed in the introduction. On the one hand the interiority was discussed negatively, as that which falls within a system, and on the other hand it was discussed more positively, as the life-world or the world-relations of a human being who is located within the world. In the chapters on psychism, Levinas first and foremost uses it in limited sense of the second interpretation, to denote the subject as it lives and thinks, prior to all relations to the world; psychism is the interiority of the subject. Later, this self-relation will be shown to be “prior to all relations to the world” only in so far as it is forgetful of these relations. This forgetfulness, which Levinas identifies with the “youth” of the subject, has important consequences, and will be examined in a separate subchapter. But the ambiguity in the term ‘interiority’ points to a tension in Levinas’ work, between the “I” that has an interiority that cannot be included in any other external system, and the “I” that is at the centre of the Same and systemises the world around it. This tension is expressed by seemingly contradictory statements.

The positive understanding of psychism as interiority plays a major role in Levinas’ philosophy as it is the point of departure for metaphysics: “‘Thought’ and ‘interiority’ are the very break-up [brisure] of being and the production (not the reflection) of transcendence. We know this relation only in the measure that we effect it; this is what is distinctive about it. Alterity is possible only starting from *me*” (TI, 40/29). In this dense quote, Levinas specifies both how the subject is something which stands out – something which constitutes a break with totality – and how it plays an essential role in the possibility of transcendence. This notion of transcendence, is not the transcendence of a subject towards the world, but more radically – in Levinas’ thought – towards the Other. While Levinas claims that the former sense of the word transcendence is not a proper transcendence, as it is only a movement within the same, the second sense of the term points toward a sense of the term where the subject stands in a relation with something towards which it cannot adequately be said to be moving. What seems to be at stake is the relation between the Same and the Other, which may be said to constitute one of the core ideas of Levinas’ philosophy. From this crucial remark we can derive three main claims concerning the subject: Firstly that the relation of transcendence is only possible given that it takes its departure from the I; Secondly, that this

transcendence is not reflected by the I, as that towards which we transcend is not an object that can be represented, but rather something that is produced; And, thirdly, that “thought” and “interiority”, which are here to be identified with psychism, constitute a break with totality. The remaining subchapters on psychism will discuss the sense of this rupture, and the way in which the subject derives a sense of separation and identity from this.

But the image of psychism as interiority described above stands in sharp contrast with other passages where Levinas describes the subject as that which is to be identified with totality. Just a few lines after the passage cited above, Levinas claims the following: “The same is essentially identification within the diverse, or history, or system. It is not I who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other” (TI, 40/30). The tension between the two descriptions, the one where the subject breaks with the system that tries to reduce it and the other where the subject cannot break with the system, sometimes simply because it is the subject itself that makes the systems, is not relieved in *Totality and Infinity*. It may be suggested that Levinas’ thoughts on how the subject is founded on a relation to Infinity might ease the tension. These thoughts, which will not be discussed in this essay, are one of the ways in which Levinas argues against the idea of the fundamentally autonomous subject. By showing how the subject always already stands in a relation with something it cannot have produced itself, and of which it cannot adequately form an idea, any description of the subject which leans towards either one of the descriptions – the subject as simply totalising or as a point of rupture – will be insufficient. Thus the tension introduced above does not disappear, but is rather a recurring theme elaborated throughout the book both by the interplay between his thoughts on responsibility and freedom, and between dependence and separation. Levinas’ pseudo-genealogical account of the subject presented in the introduction, is important as it underlines the way these different levels of analysis are always present in the actual subject.

Apart from the question of how to understand the term ‘interiority’, there are problems connected to the other terms as well. The term ‘soul’ occurs on several occasions throughout the book as a synonym to psychism. But as any discussion which distinguishes the soul from the world often seem to imply a metaphysical substance dualism – a proper discussion of which is nowhere to be found in *Totality and Infinity* – we must ask ourselves whether Levinas is engaging in an argument in defence of substance dualism. Levinas does in fact argue for a separable subject, but as this is defended in terms of temporality and not substances, I will claim that the metaphysical importance of Levinas’ argument is one of

separation and transcendence, and not one of substance dualism. Levinas' argument of psychism, as it will be presented in the below, solely refers to the first-person perspective of the subject. In order to clarify the discussion I will thus refrain from using the terms 'interiority' and 'soul', but use 'psychism' and 'inner life' synonymously. The term 'I' will refer to subject in its broader sense, and not only the subject of psychism, as will the term 'self' and 'subject'.

This examination of psychism will be guided by the way psychism offers a principle of identity for the self. By existential analysis of death and memory, Levinas wants to show that psychism is fundamentally temporal. This temporality will be shown to be an inner time – or personal time, as Levinas calls it – an idea by Henri Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, or *Time and Free Will*, as it is translated into in English. Levinas adopts the idea that time is essential to the possibility of human freedom – which Levinas, in relation to psychism, calls youth – but does not place this in the context of physics and the conservation of energy, as does Bergson. Psychism is discussed in purely vitalistic terms, only referring to the first-person perspective of the subject in question: "Interiority is essentially bound to the first person of the I. The separation is radical only if each being has its own time, that is, its *interiority*, if each time is not absorbed into the universal time" (TI, 57/50). The importance of the first-person perspective is also underlined when Levinas tries to show how the separation of the I from the Other is manifested in a concrete moral experience: "what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with that I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and speaking in the same sense of oneself and of others" (TI, 53/45). The tension between the first- and the third-person perspective, or, as it will also be called, between singularity and generality, pervades Levinas' authorship.

3.2 Epistemological and metaphysical criticism of the notion of inner life

The notion of psychism, or the inner life, is our first introduction to the Levinasian idea of personal identity. Even though Levinas soon partly integrates psychism into a broader vitalistic context, including enjoyment, it constitutes a separable principle of identity, along with its own issues. One of the main concerns is introduced by Levinas' claim in the preface

of *Totality and Infinity* that one of the major marks of a totalising philosophy is that it cannot account for psychism; in fact, that it cannot account for personal identity in general. In the preface this is described in dramatic terms as the individuals are uprooted from the original identity which they derive from themselves, and are instead given an identity relative to a system. The major part of *Totality and Infinity* is intended to correct such an understanding of subjectivity. Even though Levinas never explicitly deals with it, two generalised objections may be offered to the idea of psychism, which themselves exemplify the totalising tendency. An epistemological claim may be that psychism is too vague an idea to be the subject of philosophy, and when it is in fact formalised it often seems to presuppose a notion of infallible self-knowledge or self-awareness, which themselves are highly controversial attributes. Even more radical is the metaphysical claim that psychism is a potential illusion, reducible to e.g. neurobiological correlates. Such a metaphysical critique usually ignores – and sometimes even dissolves – the inner life, for example by explaining it away or reducing it to something that can be shown to be the ground for our illusion of inner life. The prime example of such a metaphysical debate is the mind-body-problem as it evolved in the Cartesian aftermath up to the contemporary metaphysics.

Multiple reasons may be offered for why Levinas does not engage explicitly with these criticisms, but two responses to the criticism above may be emphasised. Against the epistemological claim, it is clear that Levinas wants to overturn what he understands to be the dominance of epistemology: Preconceptions regarding knowledge should not lead us to neglect aspects of the human life, so readily present to each and every one of us. This approach is visible as he tries to show how deeply rooted these notions of inner life are to human life, but is radicalised as he wants to show how they again constitute the preconditions for the concept of truth. Levinas' conception of truth is too vast a topic to be treated in this essay, but might be summarised as following: On the one hand it is distinguished from any notion of truth which gives prevalence to justification, and on the other hand it is distinguished from the Heideggerian notion of truth which rests on disclosure, which he claims presupposes the notion of participation: "Enrootedness, a primordial preconnection, would maintain participation as one of the sovereign categories of being, whereas the notion of truth marks the end of this reign. ... The inner life, the I, separation are [sic] uprootedness itself, non-participation, and consequently the ambivalent possibility of error and of truth. The knowing subject is not a part of a whole..." (TI, 60–61/54–55). The Levinasian understanding

of truth rests on the presupposition of a separable self, and on the idea that the condition of truth is sociality.

Against the metaphysical criticism, Levinas goes on to show the plausibility of his own approach. This is both done by offering existential analyses, but also by examining the preconditions of metaphysics. He takes the subject as his point of departure, as he is working within the tradition of subject-oriented metaphysics, importantly accentuated and modified by Heidegger: “Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own Being” (BT, 26–27). Even though Heidegger’s philosophical project, as it is presented in his seminal work, *Being and Time*, is different than Levinas’ project, they both commence with an examination of the entity who is posing the philosophical questions. In Levinas’ case, this entity is described as a separable self, and as he repeatedly claims, this self is the precondition of metaphysics itself. Only insofar as we have two terms which are absolutely separable – but which yet retain a relation – can we have metaphysics, in Levinas’ understanding of metaphysics as transcendence, rather than immanence. The separation of the inquiring subject is partly produced by psychism, which thus is shown to be one of the preconditions for metaphysics.

3.3 Regulative ideas: The Levinasian *comme si*

As was mentioned in the introduction, Levinas seldom refers to the philosophers he engages with, neither when he is influenced by others’ ideas nor when he criticises them. The arguments outlined above are first and foremost directed towards general philosophical positions. The same is the case with another strategy Levinas uses in order to counter critical arguments which remain sceptical about psychism. Without invoking the whole of Kant’s systematic philosophy, Levinas employs something comparable to the Kantian regulative ideas. For Kant these ideas are ideas of reason intended to give rules and directions to the understanding. Only with these ideas may the understanding be assumed to be systematic and unified. The example at hand, offered by Kant, concerns the idea of the form of a whole of cognition: “If we survey the cognitions of our understanding in their entire range, then we find that what reason quite uniquely prescribes and seeks to bring about concerning it is the

systematic in cognition, i.e., its interconnection based on one principle. This unity of reason always presuppose an idea, namely that of the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining *a priori* the place of each part and its relation to the others. ... One cannot properly say that this idea is the concept of an object, but only that of the thoroughgoing unity of these concepts, insofar as the idea serves the understanding as a rule” (Kant 2000, A645/B673). This of course opens up the possibility that the regulative idea might be an illusion, as it lies “outside the field of possible empirical cognition” (Ibid., A644/B672). But Kant goes on to say that if the regulative idea is an illusion, it is still a necessary illusion. In Kant’s critical project the regulative ideas are ideas which are necessary for the possibility of our experience, and the example given by Kant above shows a necessary condition for the possibility of talking about objects outside of our immediate scope. As such it is a precondition for scientific theories about empirical knowledge, and as this idea of unified and systematic guides our approach to the empirical world in general, it is also necessary for our common-sense empirical knowledge, since we tend to consider our cognition to be faulty as long as it does not comply with this idea. The Kantian regulative idea is often expressed by an “as if”, for example when he rejects the possibility of a cosmological proof of the existence of God: “The ideal of the highest being is, according to these considerations, nothing other than a **regulative principle** of reason, to regard all combination in the world **as if it** arose from an all-sufficient necessary cause, so as to ground on that cause the rule of a unity that is systematic and necessary according to universal laws; but it is not an assertion of an existence that is necessary in itself” (Ibid., A619/B 647).

Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas uses the phrase “comme si” in order to convey something that is quite similar to the Kantian regulative idea.⁷ Similar to Kant, Levinas uses it to be able to talk about something that lies beyond the scope of immediate experience (in the Kantian sense), but which is presupposed both by common sense and scientific knowledge. The crucial difference between Kant and Levinas on this matter is that while Kant uses regulative ideas to describe the rules given by the reason to the understanding, Levinas’ “comme si” postulates the reality of psychism, in order to justify phenomenological descriptions of it. The postulate of reality is motivated by Levinas’ understanding of psychism

⁷ It should be noted that Levinas does not use this phrase in a systematic way. Most often it is simply used in order to avoid an essentialistic vocabulary.

as the phenomenon, where, as we shall see shortly, the potentially illusory character of the content of psychism does not negate psychism, but proves it. Levinas claims that this “comme si” is not only justified by the fact that we all seemingly experience (in the broader, non-technical sense of the term) our inner life – of which he offers existential analyses – but also by the fact that psychism is, as we saw earlier, presupposed by the possibility of the separable subject, metaphysics and truth. These are quite strong claims, but such is the nature of Levinas’ philosophy: he wants to show that the metaphysical relation between the subject and the radical Other, grounds not only all positive ethical theories, but also all other branches of philosophy: “Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy” (TI, 304/340)⁸. Psychism is the point of departure for this argument, and the way Levinas examines it in *Totality and Infinity* is through analyses of the temporality of the subject.

3.4 Time and memory

The main characteristic of psychism is that it indicates the temporality of the subject. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas discusses this in connection to all the different relations the subject engage in. As this chapter concerns psychism the discussion will here be limited to the temporality of the self-relation. The two major ways in which the temporality of the subject is unfolded are through memory and projection. Levinas often uses dichotomies in order to show the difference between totalising thought and the philosophy that expresses a respect for the individual. In relation to psychism, one of these dichotomies is that of chronological time and universal time, or as it is also described, of personal time and historical time. The universal or historical time is for Levinas an expression of totality: “The time of universal history remains as the ontological ground in which particular existences are lost, are computed, and in which at least their essences are recapitulated.” (TI, 55/48) In history each individual is understood in the light of a common time, where important existential conditions of the individual – like birth and death – are simply understood as punctual moments, deriving their “meaning” from the time and the place of the event in the universal time. The idea of time which the chronological or personal time is to counter is never ascribed to one single understanding of time. Rather it seems to be directed against several distinguishable conceptions. First of all it might be ascribed to the mechanical or scientific understanding of time criticised by Henri Bergson in *Time and Free Will*. While his book is generally directed

⁸ Levinas does not seem to distinguish between morality and ethics in any systematic way.

against the mechanical notion of time qua quantitative, it is specifically directed against Kant who, as Bergson claims, subordinates time to space by understanding time as quantifiable. But the notion of personal time is also directed against another two conceptions of time, both of them teleological. On the one hand Levinas continuously refers to an immanent teleological notion of time commonly associated with *Geisteswissenschaft*, and particularly Hegel, where time is understood to be the unfolding of a logos or rationality, only to constitute a whole in which every moment might find its place and meaning. On the other hand Levinas refers to, and clearly distances himself from, a more transcendent teleological notion of time often associated with certain religious ideas of eschatology. This latter notion of time, even though it entails an idea of a rupture, ultimately postulates a temporal whole bestowing meaning upon every temporal moment. The notion of personal time is intended to oppose all of these three different conceptions of time. The crucial point of the personal time is that it entails an irreducible first-person perspective.

This alternative conception of time known as personal time might be called a Bergsonian notion of time, as it is heavily influenced by Bergson's idea of duration. One of Bergson's main theses in *Time and Free Will*, after claiming that feelings or intensities cannot be quantified, and after distinguishing between two sorts of consciousness – immediate consciousness and reflective consciousness – is that the traditional notion of time has been dependent on the notion of space. By a series of examples, Bergson advocates a notion of time which only appears in immediate consciousness through the purely qualitative experience of our inner states. He calls this notion *pure duration*: “Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (Bergson 1960, 100/74–75). The main impact of Bergson's notion of duration on Levinas is the way it opens up the dimension of psychism (Levinas 2009, 27–28). At this point one might wonder why Levinas' notion of personal time is here associated with Bergson rather than Heidegger, and there are two main reasons for this, apart from the fact that Levinas himself emphasises the importance of Bergson. First of all the temporality of the subject or Dasein is examined in relation to two different questions. While Bergson tries to intercept the attempt to apply the same notion of time on both the mechanical world and the world of spontaneity, Heidegger examines the temporality of Dasein in order to appropriately pose the question of Being. This leads to both a difference in vocabulary in discussing the issues, and in the set of concerns. The relationship between Bergson and Heidegger is complicated, but for Levinas, the crucial distinction is that

Bergson examines life rather than Being. The second main reason for stressing the influence of Bergson rests with the idea that duration is explicitly to be understood as making possible the spontaneity of the subject. While Heidegger argues that Dasein is always ahead of itself, and that it thus cannot be described as a fully present, static existence, he goes on to claim that Dasein might be examined as a whole as Being-towards-Death. In Bergson's thought there is a similar idea of rupture, but here it is rather to be understood as discontinuity. Duration describes a discontinuous time, where no pre-formation or projection of the future is given in the present. Duration always implies something radically new, as there is no given relation between one moment and the next. Time as duration is not to be understood as a structural trait of the subject, but as immediate experience (Bergson 1960, 104–106/78–79, 239/179–180)⁹⁹. As Levinas tries to avoid understanding the task of philosophy as understanding Being, Bergson represents an important alternative for him. But Levinas is heavily influenced by Heidegger's notion of temporality as well, mainly in relation to the idea of projection, which will be examined in the next subchapter.

What is lost in the universal accounts of time is the richness of the inner life and the first-person perspective. Levinas exemplifies this by showing how the subject itself understands the moments of birth and death in her life. This analysis is mainly to show that the subject is, by virtue of psychism, a self-interpreting being, a term borrowed from Charles Taylor. The moment of birth is a necessary condition for the individual life, but for the one whose birth is in question it is only later that this moment of birth is appropriated into the narrative of one's life. More generally Levinas is claiming that even though there is a certain chronology to the human life which might be observable from the outside, the subject itself will not relate to the moments of its life in the same manner. Rather than understanding its life as a series of causes and effects, as a third-person observer might do in light of historical time, the personal time of the inner dimension leaves open the possibility of the subject being unaware of the causes and circumstances which has lead to the present situation. By virtue of temporality as it is manifested in psychism, the subject does not relate to its life simply as an effect of prior causes. Rather these circumstances are always discovered at a later moment, and then they will always be interpreted in light of that moment. Thus in contrast to the relation between cause and effect as it is understood in the universal perspective of historical time, the subject

⁹⁹ In his earlier works, such as *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*, Bergson understands time qua duration as intimately related to consciousness. In his later works, such as *Creative Evolution* he tries to expand his notion of duration so that it also concerns beings apart from those characterised by consciousness.

only *adopts* certain circumstances as causes by projecting herself towards them. This inversion where “the cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as though* [*comme si*] it were posterior to its effect” (TI, 54/47) – an inversion which Levinas admittedly calls logically absurd – is not a *matter of fact* that is reflected in thought. Rather it is an inversion that is *produced* by thought. This leads Levinas to claim that psychism is a particular way of being: “The original role of the psychism does not, in fact, consist in only *reflecting* being; it is already *a way of being* [*une manière d’être*], resistance to the totality.” (TI, 54/46). Psychism understood as temporality delineates a way of being that – by virtue of temporality itself – stresses the importance of singularity in opposition to universality.

3.5 Projection and death

As with memory and the way the human subject relates to its own past, the subject’s relation to its own future and the possibilities it entails, also represents a way the personal identity is articulated. Levinas’ analyses of the future of the self are done in terms of death and fecundity, and rather than discussing them in terms of causality, he does so in terms of possibility. But there is an important difference between what the two arguments are intended to show. Even though both of the arguments, indicates a manner in which personal identity is constituted, along with a manifestation of a breach with totality, the latter is done in a different manner. With memory Levinas claims that the inner life retains the possibility of interpretation and adoption. The same activity that produced the principle of identity – along with the moments and circumstances knitted together through memory – also produces a breach with totalising thought as it indicates a singularity that is singular by virtue of this activity. This activity we know as psychism does not necessarily entail a conscious activity resulting from reflection. There are countless acts we commit that are not preceded by a conscious reflection, but that still contribute to the production of the same identity. Singularity in this discussion is just another possible term for personal identity. In the next chapter we will examine further principles of identity, which are not the result of activity, such as enjoyment. With the relation to the future there is, along with the breach of the singular subject, another term involved which also represents a breach, namely the future towards which the subject projects itself, which is something that *cannot* constitute the identity of the self.

3.5.1 Heidegger's Being-towards-death and the notion of authenticity

The analysis of death in particular is to a large degree indebted to Heidegger, but with several important qualifications. In *Being and Time* Heidegger claims to strive towards offering a complete existential analytic of Dasein. Such an effort is challenged by seemingly inevitable event of death, which marks the end of Dasein's existence. As death is inevitable, Heidegger claims that Dasein is always directed towards it, but once death is reached, Dasein is no longer there. "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that Dasein is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself" (BT, 294). Thus, Heidegger goes on to claim, there cannot be an existential analysis of death, and a complete existential analytic of Dasein seems impossible. At this moment Heidegger proposes that this is only a problem if we treat death as an existential state, and that it should rather be understood as an ontological structure. Dasein is a being that is always ahead of itself, always projecting itself into the future. And the one possibility Dasein cannot but project itself towards is the always impending death. This existential structure of Dasein, which Heidegger calls Being-towards-death, plays an important role in Heidegger's philosophy, and we will later return to some of its other implications, but for now it is important to underline the way Being-towards-death offers a principle of individuality for Dasein.¹⁰ Heidegger introduces three important characteristics of this existential structure in the quote above. First of all, he claims that it is the possibility which concerns Dasein the most, as what is at stake is nothing but Dasein's Being-in-the-world itself. Secondly, he claims it is a relation which does not refer to any other Dasein than the one whose death is in question, and that it is a relation in which Dasein cannot be replaced: "When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone" (BT, 294). Finally, he claims that it is a relation to a potentiality Dasein cannot

¹⁰ This is a recurring theme in Heidegger's philosophy, but see also towards the end of the lecture series published as *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, where this is put in unequivocal terms: "This certainty, that 'I myself am in that I will die', is *the basic certainty of Dasein itself* It is a genuine statement of Dasein, while *cogito sum* is only the semblance of such a statement. ... insofar as I am, I am *moribundus*. *The MORIBUNDUS first gives the SUM its sense*" (Heidegger 1992, 316–317).

avoid. All of these characteristics indicate the individuality that Being-towards-death manifests amidst all of Dasein's relations.

Heidegger famously connects this existential structure to his thoughts on the authenticity of the self. As Taylor Carman points out, the technical term of authenticity [eigentlichkeit] plays at least two roles in *Being and Time*. On the one hand authenticity refers to the quality of something being properly belonging to Dasein, and by authentic modes of existence Heidegger thus means "those [modes] in which Dasein stands in a directly first-person relation to itself, in contrast to the second- and third-person relations in which it stands to others, and which it can adopt with respect to itself, at least up to a point" (Carman 2007, 285). But on the other hand authenticity is also an evaluative concept describing something that is desirable or choice-worthy. This twofold sense of authenticity has commonly been understood – an understanding shared by Levinas and many of his commentators – as leading Heidegger into the view that our life with others – Mitsein – is necessarily inauthentic as we lose ourselves into the undifferentiated cluster of first-, second- and third-person perspectives. It is only by the call of consciousness that Dasein may return from its absorption in the distractions of the world of the general *They* – of Das Mann. At this point Heidegger claims that the source of this call is no one but Dasein itself: "*In conscience Dasein calls itself. ... When Dasein is appealed to, is it not 'there' in a different way from that in which it does the calling? Shall we say that its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self functions as the caller? ... [T]he call undoubtedly does not come from someone else who is with me in the world. The call comes from me and yet from beyond me*" (BT, 320). Heidegger thus postulates a two-tiered understanding of Dasein: On the one hand Dasein is the being that has fallen by losing itself in the world, but on the other hand Dasein is the being that is characterised by being thrown into a world which is not of its own making and in which it is not at home. These notions will be discussed further in the chapter on enjoyment which concerns the subject's world-relations, but for now it is important to note that for Heidegger, Dasein moves between these two tiers in a peculiar way. In realising the naked and thrown character of its being, Dasein flees into the distractions of the world of the *They*. It is the mood [Stimmung] of anxiety that – by virtue of the ontological characteristic, or *existentiale*, of Dasein usually translated as state-of-mind [Befindlichkeit] – drives Dasein away from fundamental character of its Being-in-the-world. This mood of anxiety also plays the role of disclosing this Being-in-the-world to the fallen Dasein, on the ground of which the conscience may call on Dasein.

The notion of authenticity is to describe the possible self-relation of Dasein in which it comes to term with its own individuality by disclosing its Being-towards-death, and the concomitant ontological characteristics of its existence, such as its thrownness [Geworfenheit] or that it is always ahead of itself. This authentic existence is described by Heidegger as Dasein's anticipatory resoluteness [vorlaufende Entschlossenheit]. As such an authentic existence is an existence in which Dasein lives in light of the fact that it is accountable for what it is and is not: "By 'resoluteness' we mean 'letting oneself be called forth to one's ownmost *Being-guilty*'. Being-*guilty* belong to the Being of Dasein itself, and we have determined that this is primarily a potentiality-for-Being. To say that Dasein 'is' constantly guilty can only mean that in every case Dasein maintains itself in this Being and does so as either authentic or inauthentic existing" (BT, 353). Dasein's Being-towards-death comes into play here as it marks Dasein's primordial possibility: The self-understanding manifested by resoluteness "maintains itself *authentically in it* if the resoluteness is primordially that which it tends to be. But we have revealed that Dasein's primordial Being towards its potentiality-for-Being is Being-towards-death ... Anticipation discloses this possibility as possibility. Thus only *as anticipating* does resoluteness become a primordial Being towards Dasein's ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (BT, 354). The Dasein that leads an authentic existence has come to terms with the thrownness that characterises it, along with its potentiality-for-Being which is ultimately Being-towards-death, which gives it the responsibility that follows from the fact that Dasein's projects are Dasein's ownmost, unfolding within the horizon of the certainty of the always impending death.

3.5.2 Readdressing death

Heidegger's analyses of Dasein's Being-towards-death were to show the fundamental temporal character of Dasein, and the fact of its finitude. Levinas' initially agrees with the notion of temporality that is involved, in so far as it indicates the limits of Husserl's understanding of the future in terms of protention, where the future is understood as limited to the intuitively expected and to possible perception: "<In such anticipation> the intuitively expected, that to which one intends in foresight as 'coming in the future,' has at the same time, owing to possible reflection 'in' anticipation, the signification of something which will be perceived" (Husserl 1983, 175). Death in Heidegger's philosophy indicates another kind of future which is inevitable, but which is not a possible perception; it represents what was earlier described as the "possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein". In Levinas'

philosophy, as in Heidegger's, death is, like birth, available to analysis from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it is the end point of the subject and Levinas claims that as such death is just another punctual moment in historical time, only available to the surviving subjects, never to the subject whose death is in question. On the other hand, death may be understood in light of psychism, where it is something which the subject relates to by virtue of its inner life. The crucial difference between Levinas and Heidegger on this issue is both the role death plays in the subject's existence and the characteristics of the temporality it entails.

Levinas' first objection to Heidegger's account might at first seem a bit implausible, as what he wants to challenge is the idea of the certainty of death. "For a being to whom everything happens in conformity with projects, death is an absolute event" (TI, 56/49). As Heidegger claims that death is the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein, one could easily reverse the terms and say that death is an impossible possibility, since it can never be experienced, as Dasein is no longer *there* [Da]. By connecting Being-towards-death and authenticity Heidegger seems to lay himself bare to the objection concerning how Dasein is to appropriate the certainty of death without relying on third-person accounts. Put in Levinas' terms, we might say that even though Heidegger gives death an existential meaning for Dasein, he still understands it through the eyes of the survivors. Death as an absolute event is not something that can be derived from the first-person perspective, and the conception of it as an absolute, punctual event where Dasein no longer is present, rests on the perspective of the survivors, or the third party. This seems to lead Heidegger into a conflicting account of Dasein who is to lead an authentic life by realising its accountability of its projects and its irreducible first-person perspective in light of the fundamental structure of its existence as characterised by finality, when the certainty of death itself rests on a third-person account. Heidegger's solution to the problem is to distinguish between the ontic and the ontological level: While Dasein's own death cannot be represented at the ontic level of experience, it can be so at the ontological level of fundamental structure, revealed as a transcendental condition. But Levinas' objection to considering death as an absolute event is not that it leads Dasein into inauthenticity, but that it entails an inadequate understanding of temporality.

Levinas' attempt to reassess temporality will be addressed one step at a time. First it is important to note that Levinas does not do away with the individualising capacity of death – no one can die your death for you. But what he claims is the error of Heidegger's account is

that he fails to appreciate the radical otherness of death. The significance of death as understood in psychism is both the way it shows how psychism offers a principle of identification and the way it opens up a future that is radically unknown as it cannot be anticipated. But instead of accepting death as an absolute event indicating the finitude of the subject, Levinas wants to show that there is another dimension to death: “for there to be a separate being, for the totalisation of history to not be the ultimate schema of being, it is necessary that death which for the survivor is an end be not only this end; it is necessary that there be in dying another direction than that which leads to the end as to a point of impact in the duration of survivors” (TI, 55/48). But what is this other direction? This is Levinas’ second move, as he shifts the attention from death to dying, where the former was agreed upon as beyond the possible experience, the latter may be experienced by the subject in question. With the phenomenon of dying, Levinas is able to give a richer principle of identification. Even though Levinas would agree with Heidegger’s claim that death understood as Dasein’s ownmost offered a principle of individuation, the personal identity which follows from this individuation retains a formal structure as it rests on an impossible experience. By rather addressing dying, Levinas’ develops a principle of identity that rests on possible experience. This is dramatically expressed in his analysis of death agony which he understands as the refusal of death as an absolute event: “The death agony is precisely in this impossibility of ceasing, in the ambiguity of a time that has run out and of a mysterious time that yet remains; death is consequently not reducible to the end of a being. What ‘still remains’ is totally different from the future that one welcomes, that one project forth and in a certain measure draws from oneself... Dying is agony because in dying a being does not come to an end while coming to an end; he has no more time, that is, can no longer wend his way anywhere, but thus he goes where one cannot go, suffocates – how much longer.... The non-reference to the common time of history means that mortal existence unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history” (TI, 56/49). In this quote we can see to what degree Levinas stresses the unknown nature of death and how he reintroduces the ambiguous nature of time: time discussed as universal time where death represents an end point, and time discussed as personal time where this end point is repeatedly postponed. This latter view of time is only accessible through the first-person perspective. And it is this experience of suffering and postponement that attests individuality, rather than the formal quality of having to die one’s own death.

Both memory and dying confirms the notion of personal time, and consequently the notions of separation and identity. We have not discussed the subject's relation to its future apart from death, which is only briefly discussed in *Totality and Infinity* as the possibility of the I's "self-possession in the future" (TI, 54/47). Levinas acknowledges both the Husserlian idea of the future as protention and the Heideggerian idea of projection as two important ways in which we relate to our future. But his important contribution is that these do not offer a complete account of this relation, as the subject also relates to things which are radically different from it, and which cannot contribute to its identity. The future referred to as "what still remains" was described as something we cannot welcome nor project ourselves towards. Thus death introduces the notion of radical alterity that plays a crucial role in Levinas' philosophy, and indicates the limits of psychism discussed so far. In dying we are shown to be in a relation to death as otherness. Already in the first parts of the book Levinas connects these two terms while discussing the separation of the metaphysically desired: "This remoteness is radical only if desire is not the possibility of anticipating the desirable, if it does not think it beforehand, if it goes towards it aimlessly, that is, as towards an absolute, unanticipatable alterity, as one goes forth unto death" (TI, 34/22). The analysis of dying offers a positive confirmation of the separation by maintaining the irreducibility of personal time to universal time, but it also shows how the subject is related to something towards which it cannot project itself, as it is a radically unknown future. At this point it is crucial to clarify that by refusing death as an absolute event, Levinas is not claiming that the subject in some way lives on after its death, nor is he postulating the eternity of the soul. Rather, he wants to underline the ways in which psychism refuses to be totalised. This, he claims, is what the *idea* of the eternity of the soul was supposed to express (TI, 57/50). By comparing psychism with the idea of the eternal soul, Levinas is making a metaphysical claim about separation, not about the substantial basis of the soul. Even though Levinas several times uses the word psychism as synonymous with the soul, this is only one of the synonyms he uses. Furthermore, a discussion on the substantial basis of the soul is nowhere to be found in his book¹¹; the issue of psychism is, as we have seen, rather discussed in terms of thought and time.

¹¹ The only time Levinas actually mentions a body-soul dualism is in order to reject that he is engaging in that discussion. I quote the passage at length: "The body does not happen as an accident to the soul. Shall we say that it is the insertion of a soul in extension? This metaphor solves nothing; there would remain the problem of understanding the insertion of the soul in the extension of the body. Appearing to representation as a thing among things, the body is in fact a *mode* in which a being, neither spatial nor foreign to geometrical or physical

By highlighting the radical unknown character of death, Levinas is not trying to challenge the mortality of the human subject. As we shall shortly see, it is first and foremost an attempt to alter the notion of temporality, but it is implicitly also a criticism of the pathos of Heidegger's existentialism. By connecting death and authenticity, Heidegger turned the issue of death into a question of the self-mastery of coming to terms with the conditions of our life. The relation to death is a self-relation. In Levinas' philosophy this is not the case; as the subject's relation to death is a relation to otherness. Death is not something we live towards, but which comes to us, unforeseeable and unknown: "The imminence of death does not come from a precise point in the future... The unforeseeable character of the ultimate instant is not due to an empirical ignorance, to the limited horizon of our understanding, which a greater understanding would have been able to overcome. The unforeseeable character of death is due to the fact that it does not lie within any horizon. In death I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night" (TI, 233/259). Rather than discussing death in terms of mastery and self-relation, Levinas thus underlines our vulnerability in relation to an always impending threat. This criticism of the heroic rhetoric of the traditional existentialism will reappear later in this essay.

But finally, in what sense does Levinas' alter the notion of temporality? Underlying Levinas' criticism of Being-towards-death and authenticity is the negative assessment of sociality. Both Levinas and Heidegger agree on the importance of being able to assume second and third-person perspectives on ourselves, without which a social life would seem impossible. The problem arises when temporality is disclosed in the self-relation of its Being-towards-death. This gives rise to a particular misconception Levinas claims Heidegger falls for: "Traditional philosophy, and Bergson and Heidegger too, remained with the conception of a time either taken to be purely exterior to the subject, a time-object, or taken to be entirely contained in the subject. But the subject in question is always a solitary subject. The ego all alone, the monad, already had time. ... [I]t believed in the silent dialogue of the soul with itself" (Levinas 2004, 96–97/160–161). One might object by saying that Heidegger does not make this assumption, supported by passages such as this: "The being, in which Dasein can be its wholeness authentically as being-ahead-of-itself, is *time*. Not '*time is*' but '*Dasein qua time temporalizes its being*.'" Time is not something which is found outside somewhere as a

extension, exists separately" (TI, 168/182). Even though Levinas' claims about the body remain ambiguous, it is clear that he is not talking about two interacting substances.

framework for world events. Time is even less something which whirs away inside in consciousness. It is rather that which makes possible the being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-involved-in, that is, which makes possible the being of care” (Heidegger 1992, 319–320). What Heidegger seems to claim is that time is neither something purely interior or purely exterior, but that it is a structural trait of Being that Dasein produces simply by its way of being. But Levinas’ criticism remains intact if it is slightly reformulated. What he objects to in Heidegger’s account of temporality is not that it is purely interior or purely exterior, but that it is essentially bound to the Dasein in question. Levinas’ account of the subject’s temporality is on the contrary intended to highlight the way sociality constitutes one of the fundamental conditions for temporality. First he claims that it “is not finite freedom that makes the notion of time intelligible; it is time that gives a meaning to the notion of finite freedom” (TI, 224/247). Time is not bound either to the purely exterior world or to the purely interior psychism; rather it is connected to the plurality of social existence. The relation to death breaks up the assumed solitude of the subject by introducing plurality; we are related to something that is radically different from us. Death often, if not always point to a sociality: “Death approaches in the fear of someone, and hopes in someone. ... In the being for death of fear I am not faced with nothingness, but faced with what is *against me*, as though murder, rather than being one of the occasions of dying, were inseparable from the essence of death, as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other [Autrui]” (TI, 234/260). By explicitly criticising the Heideggerian account of death as Dasein being faced with nothingness, Levinas wants to show that death rather is characterised with being located within a social context, either by the subject being threatened by someone or aided by someone. He quickly clears out the religious interpretation of the passage quoted above by claiming that he is not referring to a religious system, but rather an irreducible interpersonal order. Levinas’ metaphysical underpinning of this temporality and sense of future is offered in fecundity. As this essay is limited to the way the subject relates to itself and the world, fecundity will not be examined here.

Analyses of Levinas’ understanding of time tend to stress the way in which it breaches with personal time and opens up to sociality, an argument that is often directed against Heidegger. In this subchapter I have tried to show how Levinas objects to certain of Heidegger’s claims and assumptions, but I have also tried to show how he retains an ambiguous notion of time. It should be clear that Levinas claims that time is not revealed by finite freedom as bound to the subject in question, but that it is rather what makes finite freedom possible. Finite freedom is

repeatedly described as having still more time, as the analysis of dying showed. Yet at the same time, Levinas defends the existential relevance of time in attesting the personal identity. In fact, even though Levinas directed a criticism against Bergson's and Heidegger's distinction between purely exterior and purely interior time, he also defends a notion of personal time, but with one modification: even though the personal time defines the possibilities of the subject in questions and opens up for the freedom we discussed in terms of memory, this time is not purely interior, but only arises in relation to alterity.

3.6 Youth and freedom

Psychism opens up a dimension of subjectivity that can neither be reduced to the way the subject is observed through the third-person perspective, nor to the world-relations the subject is engaged in. Even though the analysis of enjoyment will show that the subject's relation to the world is one of both independence and of dependence, Levinas will insist on the relative self-sufficiency of psychism. This means that even though psychism would be unimaginable without the worldly existence of the subject, the world-relations do not adequately explain the self-relation involved in psychism. At the core of this self-relation is the Levinasian notion of youth, which I earlier called spontaneity. The notion of youth was introduced when Levinas discussed the way the subject identified itself by adopting circumstances and moments through memory. What Levinas tried to show was the manner in which the subject refrained from considering itself as determined by the complex of relations that supported its existence, be it the relation to a particular site in the world or the relation between causes and effects. Even though the subject is always located within these relations of conditions, psychism opens up for the possibility that the subject may consider itself not to be determined by these relations: "by virtue of the psychism the being that is in a site remains free with regard to that site; posited in a site in which it maintains itself, it is that which comes thereto from elsewhere. The present of the *cogito*, despite the support it discovers for itself *after the fact* in the absolute that transcends it, maintains itself all by itself – be it only for an instant, the space of a *cogito*" (TI, 54/47). The inner life is what makes this suspension of conditions possible, but it should be noted that the suspension in question is a suspension within the first-person perspective. What Levinas is discussing is the subject's ability to distribute existential importance to different aspects of its life. In certain situations it seems obvious that the suspension is only possible because of a certain unawareness of the conditions, and that given

that the subject recognises these conditions, it will reassess them appropriately. But this does not eliminate the fact that the subject may relate to these conditions in different ways. The youth of psychism is to capture the activity of the subject which can only be described through the first-person perspective. But Levinas goes on to claim that this instant of youth is not merely a psychological trait of the human consciousness. Rather, it indicates a metaphysical separation: “That there could be this instant of sheer youth, heedless of its slipping into the past and of its recovered self-possession in the future... that there be the very order or distance of time – all this articulated the ontological separation between the metaphysician and the metaphysical” (TI, 55/47).

By claiming that youth indicates a metaphysical separation, Levinas builds on multiple premises we have discussed so far in the essay. First it should be clear that the principle of separation and of identity is the same in Levinas’ philosophy, and thus that the activity that produces identity also produces separation. This coincidence follows from the fact that Levinas understands both identity and separation to be grounded on singularity, a term which is contrasted with generality and universality. Thus, speaking of the principle of identity at hand – psychism – we might say that the subject draws a sense of identity by the activity involved in memory and projection, and the moment involved therein. In addition to this, it also draws identity from more passive experiences and the moments involved, as we saw in the example of dying. This identity manifests singularity as it involves something which cannot be included in a more generalised or formal account, since what is involved is only accessible from the first-person perspective. This irreducible singularity is what Levinas means by the notion of separation.

Levinas airs one objection which he ascribes to the determinist, namely that psychism may ultimately be an illusion. One response to this objection might be related to the discussion of regulative ideas, namely that if psychism is an illusion, it would be a necessary illusion. This necessity stems from his understanding of metaphysics as presupposing a radical separation between the metaphysician and the metaphysical, on which rests his account of the subject, the world, the Other, truth and ethics. But Levinas also offers another argument in defence of psychism: “The conscious being may very well involve something unconscious and implicit, and one may denounce as much as one likes its freedom as already enchained to an ignored determinism; ignorance here is a detachment, incomparable to the self-ignorance in which things lie. It is founded in the interiority of a psychism; it is positive in the enjoyment of

itself” (TI, 55/47). Even though we can always claim that the inversion of the logical order (which alters the relation between cause and effect in such a way that the subject seemingly lives in a moment of ungroundedness) is an illusion, there is a crucial difference between being ignorant of oneself as situated in a determining chain of causes and being self-ignorant in the way one is without psychism. The illusions in question are not perceptual illusions, but rather, what might be called existential illusions. That such illusions *are* possible necessitates a “way of being” in which they *could be* possible, and that is psychism. Psychism is the temporal inner life of thought and subjective experiences, by virtue of which “life between birth and death is neither folly nor absurdity nor flight nor cowardice. It flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning” (TI, 56/49–50).

The argument in defence of psychism by the possibility of illusion might look similar to the cogito-argument of Descartes’ meditations. There are certain similarities, such as that the argument takes its departure from a solipsistic subject and that it deals with the subject’s inner life, but the differences are crucial. Levinas’ argument is not a defence of substance dualism and it does not claim that the subject is capable of infallible self-knowledge. Levinas both admits that a self-relation implied by psychism may be limited and even misleading because of unconscious or implicit elements of the subject, and that this psychism itself may be an outright illusion, but as he goes on to claim, the possibility of illusion itself attests the inner life of the subject. Furthermore, Levinas’ argument does not restrict itself to analysing a thinking thing; the identity of psychism is not limited to an identity through thinking – or representing – oneself, but is more importantly found in the way we experience our inner life as temporally unified. The treatment of the inner life is thus not limited to our rationality, and opens up for the distinction between being ignorant of something and being in complete self-ignorance. While the former implies the first-person perspective of someone who potentially relates truthfully or not to his or her existential condition, such a first-person perspective cannot be ascribed to the latter.

But is this a valid argument in defence of psychism? Levinas seems to be presupposing what he is trying to prove. The difference between our ignorance of the potentially illusory character of our inner life and the self-ignorance of things is only a difference if we presuppose an inner life; it is a difference between a first-person perspective that is not destroyed by its illusory character and something that cannot be ascribed such a first-person perspective in the first place. Given that we do not presuppose an inner life and thus not the

first-person perspective, the argument from the possibility of illusion loses its power. This might mark the limits of Levinas' argument, but at this point it is important to specify that the argument is neither motivated by a radical doubt and a following search for infallible foundation, nor does it try to convince an imagined sceptic. It might seem that Levinas is instead trying to turn the tables by asking the question: Is the fact that we may have false beliefs of our inner life a sufficient reason to leave the first-person perspective all together? Given that we all live *as if* we have an inner life, is that not a sufficient reason for us treating this inner life philosophically *as if* it is real? What is at stake is the possibility of understanding the life lived between birth and death as meaningful to the subject whose existence is in question. We might wonder whether further arguments might be given in defence of psychism. If threatened by a radical scepticism, the reality of the inner life seems best supported by practical-transcendental arguments as the one offered above.

3.7 The subject's self-relation

3.7.1 Self-interpreting animals

Earlier in this chapter, I introduced Levinas' example of birth in order to show how the subject adopts different moments of its life as preconditions or causes for the moment from which this adoption is performed. Even though Levinas himself uses the term 'cause' when talking about these issues, it is clear that it is used in a dual sense. As the backdrop to Levinas' argument is the attempt to understand human action and consciousness in terms of freedom, rather than causality, it might be suggested that he should avoid talking about causes at all. For when Levinas' talks about how the subject adopts certain conditions as causes, he is discussing personal identity and self-understanding, not actual causality. While it is clear that there are cases where the ignorance or forgetfulness of certain moments in a subject's life will have an impact on the sense of identity, Levinas will not claim that such ignorance will have an impact on causality. Levinas is not endorsing the claim that a causal relation is contingent upon our knowledge and appropriation of it. Rather, he is challenging a way of explaining behaviour.

A similar argument may be found in the writings of various philosophers, among them Charles Taylor in his essay *Self-interpreting animals*. There he makes it clear that the distinction between self-interpretation and explanation – or the difference between the first-

and the third-person account – is not something that should be taken for granted, as the notion of self-interpretation “runs against one of the fundamental prejudices or, to sound less negative, leading ideas of modern thought and culture. It violates a paradigm of clarity and objectivity” (Taylor 2005, 45). But his claim is that the human subject is essentially a self-interpreting being. In this essay, Taylor chooses to discuss a set of emotions among our experiences, which he calls subject-referring feelings, and he goes on to claim that such subject-referring feelings are not only the basis of our understanding of what it is to be human, but that they are constituted by the articulations of these feelings we come to know them by and accept. Even though Taylor discusses emotions in particular, the argument might be extended to include the circumstances and conditions of our life in general as the subject relates to them in psychism, which is what Levinas in fact does. Taylor describes these feelings – his examples are shame and remorse – as characterised by referring to and including several other terms which we must understand and appropriate, and without which we would probably not have the feeling in question: “Hence we can see that our feelings incorporate a certain articulation of our situation, that is, they presuppose that we characterize our situation in certain terms. But at the same time they admit of – and very often we feel that they call for – further articulation, primarily as the elaboration of finer terms permitting more penetrating characterization. This further articulation may in turn transform the feelings” (Ibid., 63–64).

Whereas Taylor aims to show how certain feelings are conditioned by our understanding and interpretation of the situation and the different terms involved, which he ultimately wants to claim presuppose language, Levinas simply wants to show how this self-interpretation offers a principle of personal identity. Levinas notion of psychism, a self-relation which does not refer to the world or to other persons, does not intend to describe an identity is ever produced absolutely independent from the world and other persons. The kind of identity Levinas posits as peculiar to the self-relation identity does not necessarily refer to the world and the other persons. To the degree the situation and the other persons bestow an identity upon the subject it still retains the possibility of interpreting it otherwise. The terms in which Levinas discusses the possibility of self-interpretation is that of memory. Psychism as temporality produces the identity and separation of the self, both by manifesting a time that cannot be subsumed under universal time and by opening up a dimension where the subject is not simply a part of a causal chain, but where there is room for spontaneity or, as Levinas simply calls it, possibility. This is done by the possibility of memory to invert the chronological order where

the birth comes before the present of the subject: "By memory I ground myself after the event, retroactively: I assume today what in the absolute past of the origin [birth] had no subject to receive it and had therefore the weight of a fatality. ... Memory as an inversion of historical time is the essence of interiority." (TI, 56/49) The possibility of retroactively grounding ourselves manifested by memory is fundamental to the human being characterised by psychism, and thus, through the workings of psychism, "separation is not reflected in thought, but produced by it" (TI, 54/47). Levinas' notion of psychism is thus, among other things, a defence of the understanding of the human subject as essentially self-interpreting.

3.7.2 Authenticity and social mimetism

Charles Taylor's notion of subject-referring emotions and Levinas' notion of psychism both refer to an interpretative inner life, but there is an important distinction between the two arguments: Whereas Levinas simply talks about the adoption of conditions and circumstances, Taylor also discusses the articulations of the circumstances – in his example, emotions – we adopt and claims that they are ultimately conditioned by language. This opens up for another possible objection that we know from the classical existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger as the question of authenticity. In what sense can we say that our inner life is spontaneously interpretative, if it is conditioned by the cultural context in which we are located? Levinas remains dismissive of the existentialist's response to this question by the notion of authenticity, both because he claims that it is given prevalence over other ethical concerns, but also because he claims that it does not play the role in the subject's life as the existentialists try to ascribe to it. In his book *The Practices of the Self*, Charles Larmore tries to reformulate and defend a notion of authenticity which he claims plays a crucial role in our way of thinking of ourselves and the world. After clearing out some conceptions of the term, which concern "becoming what one is" or "coinciding with our true self", he defines authenticity as "our ability to give ourselves over to a certain possibility without looking at ourselves from another's point of view" (Larmore 2010, xiii). Larmore then goes on to show how this redefined notion of authenticity allows us to accommodate the mimetic character of much of our inner life. When we interpret our feelings, mental states or conditions, we often describe them from the first-person perspective as being drawn from us, we often discover, when considering ourselves from a disengaged third-person perspective, that they were in fact informed by the culture and traditions we partake in. But this, claims Larmore, does not mean that we are determined by the circumstances which we are always already located within:

“There is a world of difference between an action in which we guide ourselves by the example of others and an action that, marked though it is by the conventions of our culture, takes place without our appealing to them. In the first case, reflection plays an essential role, since the character of an action is defined by its intention ... But in the second case, reflection is absent, or at least it does not take the same form” (Larmore, 2010, 54). As the notion of authenticity in both Heidegger’s and Larmore’s treatment of it is essentially related to individuality, it becomes clear that: “The individuality of a life does not consist in the traits an individual shares with no one else... [I]ndividuality means ... that it is each individual himself, no one else in his place, who lives his own life ... What matters is the way we experience our love [which is Larmore’s example in discussing authenticity] and not the originality of our feelings” (Larmore 2010, 55–57).

Larmore’s notion of authenticity is intended to capture the self-relation of the subject. His analysis of social mimetism and following reformulation of authenticity, allow us to avoid an objection Levinas seemingly was exposed to, namely that the spontaneity of psychism might be reduced to the conventions of the culture and traditions the subject is located within. Even though Levinas does not address these questions explicitly, it is clear that he would follow a similar line of argumentation, as the identity produced by psychism does not rest on the originality of the content of psychism, but on the *possibility* to “invert the chronological order” and the conscious experience of it. As we shall see later, the identity is also produced by the quality of *mineness* that characterises all experiences. There is another important similarity between the arguments offered by Larmore and Levinas, which concerns the self-relation of the subject, but as this also concerns the notion of enjoyment, it will be discussed in the next chapter.

4 Enjoyment and dwelling

Psychism offered a principle of individuation independent from any world-relations, and thus marked the separation of the “I” from all other relations it might engage in apart from a self-relation. By the notions of enjoyment and dwelling, Levinas wants to show another two principles of identification, this time by analysing how the subject identifies itself in relation to the world. That these two principles are to be separated from psychism is established by the notion of youth examined above, but enjoyment and dwelling are to be considered as deepening an identity already established in *Totality and Infinity* by virtue of psychism. Due to Levinas’ pseudo-genealogical approach to subjectivity, psychism, enjoyment and dwelling represent intimately connected, yet separable moments, which are present simultaneously, even though the notion of enjoyment and dwelling is shown to more fundamental. It is interesting to note that Levinas begins by explicating psychism, thus establishing the importance of the existential dimension of self-relation that entails from the inner life. And while this existential dimension and the adjacent spontaneity of youth retain their importance in enjoyment, their independence is shown to be correlated with a dependence necessitated by corporal existence in the world. Thus, even though Levinas begins his exposition by analysing the separation of psychism, and later goes on to claim that it is in enjoyment that the dawn of subjectivity takes place, both levels of analysis are necessary, along with the third level of ethical subjectivity – that is, relation with the Other – for the complete understanding of the Levinasian subject. So, while the levels might be separated in analysis, they are always already concurrent in the actual subject. But by separating them we are able to discern the different traits they entail: they constitute different relations, they relate to different relata, and with regards to the question of activity and passivity, the different layers of subjectivity might be attributed different levels of fundamentality. The tension between dependency and independency which was first introduced by Levinas with his thoughts on the personal time of memory and projection, now resurfaces in the relation between the enjoying subject and the world. As the individuation of psychism produced the separation of the subject from the world through the positive movement of psychism itself, so will enjoyment and dwelling show how the subject is separated both from the world in its relation to the world and from the metaphysical other by two different positive traits by the relations in question: the happiness of enjoyment and the extraterritoriality of the dwelling. The separation in question is not intended as a claim that the subject is able to shut itself from the world, or become

independent of it, but rather that the subject retains a sense of identity even though it remains dependent on the world. Or to put it otherwise, it is not sufficient to account for the world-relations of the subject in order to understand the subject, as a sense of identity is produced through these relations, which makes them personal. This idea will be examined throughout this chapter.

The analysis of enjoyment exposes the human subject's most fundamental way of being in the world. As human subjects we are located in a world which surrounds us, and whose content we relate to in multiple ways: as nourishment so that we can sustain our existence, as things we may utilise as tools or as things we may perceive as objects for representation in knowledge. Heidegger's analysis of our being-in-the-world was intended as a critique of the traditional prioritising of the theoretical relation to the world first by showing that we have a more primordial practical relation to the world as a structural whole of practical relations; a structure of finalities Dasein is engaged with prior to any reflection and thematisation, but which only becomes a theme in so far as the structure breaks down. But even more essentially, Heidegger's critique was to show that our diverse relations to the world are to be understood in light of our fundamental way of being, that of care [Sorge]. Care – the way Dasein's own Being is an issue for it – and the related concepts of concern [Besorge] – in relation to the Dasein's activities – and solicitude [Fürsorge] – in relation to Dasein's being with others – is intended to be prior to any distinction between theoretical and practical. Rather, it is only in so far as Dasein's Being is defined as care, that the practical and the theoretical constitute two possibilities of Being [Seinsmöglichkeiten] for it (BT, 235–238). As with care, enjoyment is intended to show a fundamental level of our relation to the world, a relation that pervades both the theoretical and the practical relation. It is directed as a critique of the fundamental character of care, and does not replace any of the other relations between the subject and the world, even if it offers a modification of them.

4.1 Enjoyment as “vivre de...”

Enjoyment is the way human beings both live off and live from the world [vivre de...]¹², where the things and objects we are surrounded by and the activities we engage with them in

¹² The French phrase “vivre de...” has a dual sense which in English is expressed as “living off and from...”. The usual translation of this phrase is “living from...”, and I will use this translation, but always with the duality in mind.

constitute the content of life: “One does not only exist one’s pain or one’s joy; one exists from pains and joys. Enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity. To live from bread is therefore neither to represent bread to oneself nor to act on it nor to act by means of it. ... But if I eat my bread in order to labor and to live, I live *from* my labor and *from* my bread. ... [E]njoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life – it embraces them” (TI, 111/114). This way of relating to the world is beyond the distinction between theoretical and practical: “What I do and what I am is at the same time that *from which* I live. We relate ourselves to it with a relation that is neither theoretical nor practical. Behind theory and practice there is enjoyment of theory and of practice: the egoism of life” (TI, 113/115–116). What Levinas is trying to convey is that even though we treat things in the world both as objects of representation and as tools or implements for our activities, there is a sense in which these thoughts and actions, as well as the objects and things engaged by them, constitute the content of our life and, as Levinas also puts it, the value [prix] of our life.

Levinas’ notion of enjoyment is intended to show that the human subject cannot be reduced to any formal trait, or to bare existence, since it is always endowed with content. Such an understanding of existence, or life, as Levinas prefers to call it when discussing it in this rich sense, is the basis of Levinas’ refutation of care as the fundamental structure of the ways of being in the world: “Life is not the naked will to be, an ontological *Sorge* for this life. Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun” (TI, 112/115). It is interesting to note that while Levinas first introduces enjoyment as a critique of a formalistic account of subjectivity, he here also criticises a certain form of existentialism. In the first sentence of the quote above, he seems to conflate two distinct views, namely a view on life as a “naked will to be” on the one hand, and *Sorge* – or care – on the other. While the latter is intended to be a reference to Heidegger, the former view stands without any specified direction.¹³ That these two characteristics are to be separated is apparent as Heidegger clearly

¹³ Even though this reference stands without specified direction, it is intended to criticise any philosophy that reduces life to bare existence. Nietzsche stands as a plausible advocate for such a view. In the following quote he understands life as reducible to a will or an urge, as well as denying any further value to life: “There is nothing to life that has value, except the degree of power – assuming that life itself is the will to power” (Nietzsche 1968, 37).

states that care is not reducible to any will or drive: “The phenomenon of care in its totality is essentially something that cannot be torn asunder; so any attempts to trace it back to special acts or drives like willing and wishing or urge and addiction, or to construct it out of these, will be unsuccessful. ... Care is ontologically ‘earlier’ than the phenomena we have just mentioned” (BT, 238). In what way then is enjoyment opposed to care, if it not to be conflated with a formalistic account of subjectivity, or a reductive account of existence as ‘bare’? The critique of care represents a third critical angle of enjoyment, which is directed against Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein’s fundamental structure as care: “Dasein is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue” (BT, 236). To be an issue, is to be understood as “self-projective Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (BT, 236). This structure of care, combined with the idea of *Jemeinigkeit* – the idea that this Being that is at issue, is in each case mine – founds the basis for Heidegger’s thought about authenticity and inauthenticity discussed earlier in relation to psychism (BT, 67–68). It is this understanding of a subject occupied by its own being and striving for authentic living, that Levinas wants to counter with his notion of enjoyment: “The love of life does not resemble the care for Being, reducible to the comprehension of Being, or ontology. The love of life does not love Being, but loves the happiness of being” (TI, 145/154). Human existence is characterised with a sense of meaning since it is always already engaged in activities and situations which contribute to the identity of the subject in question. Care cannot be the fundamental characteristic of the subject as the subject does not fundamentally concern itself with its Being. Rather, it is concern with its always already meaningful and content-endowed life – and ultimately the life of the Other. This is the sense of Levinas’ claim that the subject “can sacrifice its pure and simple being to happiness. It *exists* in an eminent sense; it exists above being” (TI, 63/57). The opposition between enjoyment and care thus lies at the level of axiology and ontology, as Levinas puts it (TI, 119/123–124), where axiology assumes primacy over ontology.

Even though Levinas’ notion of enjoyment is primarily directed against care because the latter notion is understood as related to the idea of authenticity and related to the question of the meaning of the overarching concept of Being, enjoyment is also directed against a particular existentialistic rhetoric. This latter criticism was discussed in relation to psychism and authenticity, and will resurface later in the subchapter on dwelling. But the rhetoric of Levinas’ text itself should not be allowed to pass without comment. As was mentioned in the introduction, Levinas often chooses a polemical tone in his writing, and this is often expressed

by the way he coins his ideas. In his discussions about death he chose examples of violence and murder in order to express that death was not to be understood as something we lived towards, but something which took us by force and by surprise. The same polemical phrasing is the case with the notion of enjoyment. While the examples and phrases concerning death stood in stark contrast with the idea they opposed, they still clearly and relatively unambiguously expressed the Levinas' point. Levinas' way of discussing enjoyment is more problematic as the term is, to some extent, misleading. By choosing words and phrases like 'enjoyment', 'happiness' and 'love of life' in describing our fundamental way of relating to the world, Levinas' is trying to counter what he considers the seriousness of the traditional existentialistic account of our worldly existence. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses our Being-in-the-world in terms of thrownness, falling, alienation and potential solitude. A similar tone is to be found in Sartre's writing, which often underline the sense of alienation from the world, famously expressed in his novel *Nausea*, where the protagonist, Roquentin, is contemplating the root of a chestnut tree when he is suddenly revolted by and alienated from the world through an illuminating experience of its quality of existence (Sartre 2012, 180–192). But are Levinas' terms – which are univocally positive – fit to describe our fundamental relation to the world? If Levinas had claimed that, all we would need in order to falsify Levinas' descriptions would be a situation which could only with great difficulty be described in positive terms. And in fact, Levinas offers at least one such description himself, which is the aforementioned agony of dying. Thus, 'enjoyment', 'happiness' and 'love of life' should be taken as technical terms referring to the manner in which the subject both lives off the world and yet retains an independence from it by the way all our activities and the contents of these activities contribute to our identity. These terms thus do not assume the positive characteristics of the situations in question, even though the terms themselves seem to suggest otherwise.

4.2 Enjoyment as affectivity and the notion of materiality

Levinas' account of enjoyment is constituted by two main aspects: one has already been discussed as the "living from...", while the other is the subject's relation to elements, a relation in which the affectivity or passivity of the subject is most distinctly shown. The affectivity of the self in relation to the elements is one of sensibility. In order to understand

Levinas' theory of the elements it is important to distinguish between the things we encounter and the background from which they emerge. The things are distinguished by their form: "The form which separates the object, which delineates sides for it, seems to constitute it" (TI, 160/172). This form is not given to us in enjoyment, but presupposes labour, be it practical or theoretical. Of these two forms of labour Levinas claims that the practical is primary: it is the practical engagement with things that first delineates the form they have as things. The world of things is thus conditioned by the bodily engagement with things inside the world. So far Levinas agrees with Heidegger's critique of the primacy of the theoretical, but by introducing the relation of enjoyment to the elements, Levinas wants to show a primordial relation to the world in which the subject remains passive. This relation is Levinas' first realistic case against the plausibility of idealism, the second case being the metaphysical relation to the Other. The importance of the elements in Levinas' philosophy is twofold: On the one hand they are the material basis to any construction offered through labour, and on the other hand they show the subject to be primarily passive qua affective.

4.2.1 Things, objects and elements

Even though Levinas is not always consistent, he intends to offer a philosophical distinction between the terms object and thing. While the 'object' usually designates the object of intentionality or representation, the 'thing' refers to an entity we engage with practically through labour. He goes on to claim that we have a relation to the world prior to the level of differentiation into objects or things, which he describes as the elemental level. The elements are the undifferentiated background from which labour makes the things emerge. Levinas also refers to them as medium [milieu] and pure quality. While things are available to possession, as labour gave them a form that made them available and graspable, the elements are "a common fund, or terrain, essentially non-possessable, 'nobody's': earth, sea, light, city" (TI, 131/138). The examples given are supposed to highlight some of the main characteristics of the elements: they are formless and as formless they are ungraspable. Furthermore, as formless they do not have any side towards which we can approach them; rather: "The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element" (TI, 131/138). The elemental world constitutes the materiality of the world of things, which is the result of labour. This materiality is available to us, but as the elemental is without any objects or things, our relation to it is not bound to any distinct content. In fact, Levinas claims that there is not any substantial supporting ground on what

might only inadequately be called the objective side of the subject's experience of the elements. Rather they are given as pure qualities; qualities which refer to nothing: "The pure quality of the world does not cling to a substance that would support it. ... It is not a question of a *something*, an existent manifesting itself as refractory to qualitative determination. Quality manifests itself in the element as determining nothing" (TI, 132/139). But only a few paragraphs later, Levinas offers what might seem like a contradictory statement: "Enjoyment – an ultimate relation with the substantial plentitude of being, with its materiality – embraces all relations with things" (TI, 133/140). This allows us to specify what Levinas is claiming with the theory of the elemental.

By the terms 'substance' and 'substantial' Levinas seldom seems to designate a substance in the sense of the greek *ousia*, as the fundamental or foundational entities of reality. Rather, his use seems to be closer to that an "intuitive" or "naïve" notion of a thing, where it is contrasted to events or properties. Initially, this understanding of substance as an "intuitive" notion of things must be separated from Levinas' understanding of things, as the latter only arise as the result of labour. But in the quote at hand, Levinas uses the term 'substantial' in relation to materiality, which makes it more difficult to uphold this interpretation of the former term. But what does Levinas mean by materiality, given that enjoyment is primarily defined as a relation to the elements? First of all, the elements have been defined as an undifferentiated background that meets us as pure qualities, or as he also puts it, as "adjectives without substantive" (TI, 132/139). With Levinas' phenomenological commitments in mind it should be clear that he is describing the ground for our experience of the world, and not defending a metaphysical thesis about substance monism or dualism. The elements as pure qualities constitute the basis for our experience of the world, prior to any distinction between things and objects. This relation to the elements is the most basic relation we have to the world, and pervades all our other relations. The use of the term substantial in the quotation above was thus misleading, as it was used in a non-technical term with the derived meaning of being fundamental. But usually Levinas' intension is for it to designate the formal qualities of the things resulting from labour, and thus not a form of fundamental entity: "The hand delineates a world by drawing what it grasps from the element, delineating definite beings having forms, that is, solids; the informing of the formless is solidification, emergence of the graspable, the *existent*, *support* of qualities. Substantiality thus does not reside in the sensible nature of things" (TI, 161/173).

Characterised as a thing that is clearly delineated, with a distinct form – as a *solid*, the substances, or things, are available for representations. This is another important distinction between elements on the one hand and things and object on the other, the latter of which is essentially to be understood as representation. The elements are not available for representations, but yet we relate to them by virtue of the sensibility of enjoyment. The fundamental character of the materiality of the elements lies in that they are the basis of all constitution of things – as all things arise from labour with the elemental – and of many of the objects, in so far as these representational objects which in turn refer to things. The idealist understanding of representation, which do not refer to any further things, might seem to avoid this critique by the claims of sufficiency that lies latent in the Husserlian notion of universal epoché which excludes any claim of existence or reality, not only on behalf of the object of experience, but the totality of the external world. The claim of sufficiency lies in that no extra-mental content is admitted into the analysis, which makes the epoché stand in a conflict with the possibility of object-dependent intentional content. The Levinasian notion of elements opposes such a limitation on the content of analysis, as the elements, which Levinas describes as coming towards us from nowhere, cannot be reduced to being purely interior, but rather arises from our worldly existence in which we are always already located in the midst of the elements. And since Levinas claims that the relation to the elements are the most primordial relation to the world and that it is characterised by the passive affectivity of the subject, the notion of elements is also a criticism of the idealist theory of representation.¹⁴ Where does this leave us with the status of the element as the materiality of the world of things and representations? Even though materiality is not one of the key terms of Levinas' philosophy, Simon Critchley has on several occasions described Levinas' philosophy as “a *material phenomenology of subjective life*, where the conscious I of representation is reduced to the sentient I of enjoyment” (Critchley 2009, 63). This is a term more often associated with another French phenomenologist, namely Michel Henry, but might well be ascribed to Levinas as well, given that we keep his special notion of materiality in mind.

4.2.2 Different modes of consciousness: empirical vs. transcendental readings

¹⁴ The arguments Levinas offers in defence of this notion of the elemental lies in his existential analysis of nausea in *On escape* and of insomnia in *Existence and Existents*. The strength of the arguments rests on the accuracy of Levinas' analysis, but due to the limited scope of this essay, these analyses will not be discussed.

Even though this essay is concerned with the personal identity and the singularity of the subject, it is important to give a coherent reading of the relations the subject engages in, as it is by virtue of these that the identity is produced. This also necessitates an examination of the status and relata of these relations. Levinas' discussion of the notions of things, objects and elements is to a large degree indebted to the tradition of phenomenology, which Levinas constantly refers to, either by appraisal or by criticism. In this section I want to discuss two of the more central phenomenological notions Levinas' criticises, namely the notion of intentionality and of representation, and see how this criticism plays out in Levinas' conception of the different relations the subject engages in. The discussion might be formulated into two questions. Firstly, what is the status of the relation involved in enjoyment? Is it to be understood as a form of consciousness or rather as an existential structure directing all forms of consciousness? And secondly, to what extent are the different relations the Levinasian subject engages in connected to the phenomenological notion of intentionality, and what status does the relata of these relations have? These questions concern both the relation of enjoyment and the metaphysical relation, but as this essay is concerned with the notion of subjectivity in psychism, enjoyment and dwelling, it is mainly the former that will be treated.

Georg W. Bertram has recently written an article where he addresses these questions and defends the claim that the relation to alterity is a structural trait of all consciousness, and not itself a special type of consciousness with a special kind of object. His argument is important as it sides with the transcendental reading of Levinas' philosophy on the question of whether the Other should be understood as a ground for experience or as empirically accessible. Even though Bertram's argument is limited to moral consciousness understood as the relation with radical alterity, it is still relevant to discuss this as analogous to sensibility and the elements, in that the question we pose on both occasions is whether there are multiple types of consciousness and objects. In his revisionary reading, where he understands the fundamental idea of Levinas' philosophy to be that of normativity in a sense which is broader than simply ethical, he claims that moral consciousness is neither to be understood as a special type of consciousness nor as having a special kind of object. In fact, he claims, as moral consciousness is to be understood in contrast to correlation-consciousness – which is what Bertram calls Husserl's notion of intentionality – and as only correlation-consciousness is understood as having an object, moral consciousness does not have an object at all. Bertram goes on to claim that it is only by rejecting the two theses about the special type of

consciousness and the special kind of object, that we may understand moral consciousness as fundamental. He concludes his argument by developing the sense in which moral consciousness is fundamental: “The fundamental role of moral consciousness must be understood in such a way that it enters into all other forms of consciousness. A particular directedness lies in all consciousness as such. .. [T]he consciousness on which Levinas focuses is not to be conceived of as a special mode of consciousness, but as a structure that is irreducibly at play in all consciousness” (Bertram 2012, 117). Moral consciousness is thus to be understood as a structural directedness towards alterity, which, as he later qualifies, is “an irreducible dimension of all – objective – consciousness” (Ibid., 119). Correlation-consciousness and moral consciousness are to be understood as two inseparable dimensions where the moral consciousness constitutes a fundamental structural directedness for all correlation-consciousness. This directionality is not simply the *aboutness* that usually is ascribed to intentionality, but rather a non-objectivising directedness. By the notion of non-objectivising directedness, Levinas expresses the idea that every consciousness of an object is marked by sociality, or to put it otherwise, by our directedness towards others: “In each thing that comes to consciousness there resides a relation to others. Levinas’s explications can be varied in this sense, to gain consciousness of something means to offer the world to another through (one’s own) consciousness” (Ibid., 117). This revisionary reading of Levinas is intended to broaden the scope of Levinas’ argument by showing that the fundamental idea of his thought is that of a normativity which pervades all domains of practical and theoretical philosophy. This argument leads him to claim that since alterity and the relation to objects are irreducibly connected, we cannot engage in a relation with objects without also being engaged in a relation of alterity, and visa versa. Even though Bertram does not explicitly claim that all consciousness is bound by being about an object, he claims that there is no relation to alterity without a relation to objects: “One can speak of two dimensions that shape all of consciousness: objectivity and alterity. The two dimensions cohere irreducibly” (Ibid., 118). The prime example he offers from Levinas is that of the linguistic articulation of the world which shows that a meaningful world requires a world which is offered by the subject to the other through speech: “This objectivity is correlative not to some trait in an isolated subject, but of his relation with the Other. Objectification is produced in the very work of language” (TI, 209/230). Thus, directedness towards alterity is a structural trait of consciousness, and not a special type of consciousness with a special kind of object.

As should be clear from my reading of the relation to the elements through enjoyment, I want to argue that Bertram's understanding of Levinas' notion of consciousness, while being accurate on the consciousness of the world of things, excludes major parts of Levinas' argument. Even though the relation to the elements is not a relation to alterity, it is a special kind of consciousness, with a special kind of relata, namely the elements. The elements are not something we can relate to through the objectivity accomplished by the linguistic articulations of the world. If we admit that we are related to a particular relata in our relation with the elements, it is clear that it cannot be described as an object – as objects in the phenomenological sense depends on being at least partly constituted through activity – and that it thus cannot be described without recourse to a type of consciousness that is not objectivising. Sensibility, our fundamental relation to the world, is not simply an undifferentiated registration of sensory data – as we through the passivity of sensibility also relate to the world as meaningful, something which will be further examined in the subchapter on happiness. But sensibility is not the willing and activity of the objectivising and positing consciousness as intentionality either. Refusing to counter the problem of schematism posed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – rather choosing to sidestep it – Levinas does not ask how the subject applies pure concepts in order to systematise its empirical sense perceptions, but rather how the subject may accommodate differentiations already manifested by something exterior. As such sensibility is characterised as a consciousness being “about” something in a non-objectivating, non-positing and ultimately non-active way.

Bertram's reading of Levinas is instructive in that it tries to expand the impact of Levinas' philosophy by showing that his core ideas have an impact on all the major dimensions of philosophy and not exclusively on ethical or practical philosophy. Even though I agree with Bertram on this claim, the understanding of the relation to the Other as a structural directedness seems to be an unwarranted conflation. In a crucial passage that will be quoted at length, Levinas specifies his understanding of sensibility: “[Sensibility] is not to be confused with still vacillating forms of ‘consciousness of.’ It is not separated from thought by a simple difference of degree, nor even by a difference in the nobility or the extent of expansion of their object. Sensibility does not aim at an object, however rudimentary. It concerns even the elaborated forms of consciousness, but its proper work¹⁵ consists in enjoyment, through which

¹⁵ The French word here is ‘œuvre’ in its masculine sense which, where the feminine form designates labour and activity, rather is to be understood as the product, quite similar to the way ‘œuvre’ is used in the English

every object is dissolved into the element in which enjoyment is steeped. For in fact the sensible objects we enjoy have already undergone labor. The sensible quality already clings to a substance” (TI, 137/145). This dense passage touches upon many of the crucial moments of the current discussion. First Levinas draws a distinction between sensibility and intentionality. As thought at this point is to be understood in relation to representation, and thus is to be identified as a theoretical form of activity, it is also to be related to intentionality. Sensibility, in contrast to intentionality, does not involve any object, taken in its technical sense. When Levinas goes on to discuss sensible objects, this might seem to constitute a contradiction with how he has just started describing sensibility, but this tension is resolved by the duality in the notion of sensibility, which is also present in the notion of enjoyment. Enjoyment is to be taken in a strict and a wide sense. The strict sense limits enjoyment to the enjoyment of the elements, something which is related to solely through enjoyment. The wide sense of enjoyment, the sense in which we must understand the “living from...” relates to object, things, activities and relations; it relates to everything which constitutes the content of life. As sensibility is the mode of enjoyment, this duality is reflected in sensibility. Thus sensibility relates both to the pure qualities of the elements and to the qualities as already grounded in a substance. This duality shows that even though we might sense objects as well, the proper understanding of sensibility – that is, sensibility in its strict sense, where it is prior to any activity on part of the subject – relates to something that cannot properly be called an object. Thus Levinas’ claim in the passage quoted above is not that sensibility is not “about” anything, but that it should not be understood in terms of intentionality. It is not an empty or limited form of intentionality directed towards vague objects, but this does not entail that it is not directed towards anything at all. Sensibility is to be understood as an independent faculty directed towards the materiality of the world prior to any activity from the subject.

Even though Levinas does not always use the term consistently, his leading understanding of the object rests on the Kantian and Husserlian tradition. Kant delineated a critical notion of the object, contrasted to what he claimed was the realist assumption latent in most of the pre-Copernican philosophies, by which he claimed that the object of the senses could not be fundamental, in the sense that it could constitute the intuition of the object, as this would make any a priori understanding of it impossible. Rather, the object has to be understood as

language today. Even though this sense of the word still retains connection to activity, it is not to be conflated with the word Levinas uses to express labour in the sense we have discussed here, for which he uses the term ‘travail’.

the object of understanding, in which the objects conforms to the concepts *a priori*. The Kantian notion of the object is the object of activity, and not of the passivity of sensibility, something which becomes apparent as Kant goes on to say that only the object which we can cognise as it conforms to the concept *a priori*, is a possible object of experience, the limit of which is given by activity: “we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them” (Kant 2000, BXVII–BXVIII). Such an understanding of the object is likewise to be found in Husserl’s phenomenological idealism. When Husserl introduces the phenomenological epoché, he also offers the following distinction between natural being – the world and its content as it is given to continuous experience with the supposition of existence – and transcendental being – the pure being as *a priori* possibility as it is given when the existence-supposition is suspended by the epoché as a realm of pure, *a priori* possibility. This again leads to the distinction between the ‘actual’ object as it is given to natural consciousness, and the ‘immanent’ object as it is given when pure consciousness observes its own conscious act and its content. Even though Husserl will retain the interest in what it is that leads the subject to assume the actuality of objects, or “existential holding-good” as he calls it, important parts of Husserl’s thought treat the object as immanent to consciousness, and discuss it in terms of how it is constituted by consciousness. These two main components – the activity of the subject and the immanence to consciousness – as they are developed by Kant and Husserl determine the main sense of the term ‘object’ in Levinas’ philosophy. Understood in this way, it should come as no surprise that Levinas refrains from describing the elements as objects.

This excursion leads us back to Betram’s important question concerning whether there are multiple types of consciousness that takes different kinds of objects. In the sense of the term ‘object’ that has just been explicated, it seems clear that Levinas does not think that neither enjoyment nor moral consciousness takes any special object, but this does not rule out that they still constitute different types of consciousness. Such a claim would only be valid if all states of consciousness were intentional and objectional, but not even Husserl claims this. Husserl’s most well-known example of non-intentional consciousness is pain. Even within intentional consciousness Husserl differentiates between positional and non-positional consciousness, where the former posits the existence of the intentional object, while the latter does not form any such judgment, but where such a judgment might be formed if the attention is redirected. Examples of objects that Husserl discusses in terms of non-positional intentionality are imagined objects and most importantly the unattended surroundings of the

posited object (Husserl 1983, 99). Even if Husserl grants the non-positional intentionality of the unattended surroundings, there is an important difference between this example and Levinas' thought, as the unattended surroundings are available for objectification if the subject's attention is redirected, whereas this is not possible with the elements or the Other. Thus Levinas' understanding of our relation to the elements and the radical Other is best described as non-positional, non-objectivating and non-active. He clearly claims that the metaphysical relation is not to be understood as intentionality, as "this Husserlian term evokes the relation with the object, the posited, the *thematic*, whereas the metaphysical relation does not link up a subject with an object" (TI, 109/111). Levinas admits that there is a similarity in the relation of enjoyment to that of intentionality "taken very broadly", simply by the fact that every moment of life is in relation with something other than that moment itself. This generalisation, as it concerns every moment of life, also reaches out to the metaphysical relation. But Levinas quickly clarifies that this similarity with the Husserlian notion of intentionality is only apparent, as the directedness that is similar to enjoyment, metaphysical consciousness and intentionality, is not the core of intentionality. This latter notion is rather to be understood as essentially consciousness of an object, and this notion of an object is, according to Levinas, essentially to be understood as representation: "already from the first exposition of intentionality as a philosophical thesis there appeared the privilege of representation. The thesis that every intentionality is either a representation or founded on a representation dominated the *Logische Untersuchungen* and returns as an obsession in all of Husserl's subsequent work" (TI, 122/127). The limitations of the intentional relation are distinctly set forth when Levinas discusses intentionality in relation to the clear and distinct ideas of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Husserl's *Cartesian Meditation*. While both Descartes and Husserl claims that there is a separation between – in Husserl's and Levinas' terms – the intentional act and the intentional object, the object of representation involved in the clear and distinct idea given to consciousness still remains interior to thought. As the objects are to be understood as intelligible, and this intelligibility is understood by virtue of *Sinngebung*, or sense-bestowal we are able to examine the way Husserl claims the subject contributes to the sense of the object. Sense-bestowal is a notion Husserl introduces after having performed the epoché in which the positing of actual existence is suspended, allowing us to see how the noematic act constitutes the sense of the intentional object through considering, for example, the perceived object *as perceived* or the judged object *as judged* (Husserl 1983, 213–216). This correlation between the act (noema) and the data (noesis) leads

Levinas to claim that the Husserlian phenomenology prioritises representation and construction: “Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought ... The intelligible is precisely what is entirely reducible to noemata ... In the intelligibility of representation the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced” (TI, 123–124/129). In Descartes’ case, his understanding of the intelligibility of the object in terms of clarity, does not necessarily lead him to idealism, as Husserl argues for in his work. Descartes is often rather considered to be a proponent of a sort of naïve realism. But Levinas criticises Descartes for giving sensibility too small a role in the account of the subject. But in comparison to Husserl, Levinas grants that Descartes does not define consciousness in terms of idealistic representations. It should be noted though that Heidegger offers an alternative reading of the role of representation in Descartes’ understanding of consciousness. He claims that the formula of representation pervades the whole spectre of consciousness, not only knowing and thinking, but also willing, asserting, feeling, sensing and imagining (Heidegger 1991, 106–109). But both Descartes and Husserl, Levinas claims, fails to appreciate the fundamental role of sensibility, which leads them both to understand exterior in terms of interiority.¹⁶

If consciousness *qua* intentional is defined by relating to its objects as representation by virtue of the epoché, and thus concerns the consciousness as objectivating and active, what are the alternatives? That Levinas clearly speaks about different relations are beyond doubts; but the question remains on what kind of status these relations have. Whereas Bertram’s reading argues that these relations are structural, and do not involve a special kind of relata, I have wanted to show that such a transcendental reading cannot give an account of what Levinas says about the elements and the metaphysical other. Even though a transcendental, non-empirical relation is conceivable, a structural account of these two peculiar relations seems to invalidate the value of the existential analysis Levinas offers in order to support his claims. Whereas I agree with Bertram both on the fundamental character of the relation with alterity and the way it enters into all the major philosophical domains, and not just that of ethics, such a claim does not seem to necessitate an understanding of this relation as merely structural. I have argued that these relations are a type of consciousness. But if the relata of these relations are not objects, what are they then? Even though the consciousness of the elements and the

¹⁶ Descartes’ idea of infinity from his third meditation represents an exception for Levinas, and constitutes the main influence on his own idea of infinity.

relation to the Other has been treated together in this subchapter as they both are non-positional, non-objectivating and non-active, this is where the differences arises. As a relata, the elements are not something merely surrounding the thing we direct our attention towards, something that can be discerned when we redirect our attention, nor are they simply vague and indiscernible objects. As Levinas' existential analyses are supposed to show, these elements are definitely something even though they are not intentional objects, vague objects or background objects: they are pure qualities, unsupported by any object or substance, and hence formless. Our consciousness of the elements shows us that before any activity, we are surrounded by something that neither owes its existence to our positing, nor its sense to our sense-bestowal. This consciousness is described by Levinas as "the consciousness of consciousness" (TI, 112/114), but that this consciousness is defined, neither by reflection nor by representation. Again, following Levinas' phenomenological commitments, the crucial question is not what these things are in themselves, but how we relate to them. And by examining how we relate to the elements and the Other, we discover that in these cases we relate to something which cannot be adequately understood through epoché, as they cannot be reduced to immanent intentional content. The difference between the elements and the Other is that the ground for this irreducibility concerning the elements is their incessant movement towards the subject prior to any activity on its behalf, while it concerning the Other is the way the Other expresses itself. The latter issue will be discussed further in the chapter on the notion of the human Other.

4.2.3 A sense of identity in affectivity

In enjoyment the subject is shown to be primarily affective through sensibility. As enjoyment is prior to any sort of theoretical or practical activity with regard to the object or activity in question, the elemental world constitutes an incessant presence over which the subject has no power of constitution or transformation. It might seem difficult to reconcile this idea of enjoyment as affectivity with what we have already said about enjoyment, namely that it is a way of identity. Any account of identity through enjoyment must address the question of how an identity is possible within the constant presence of the flux of content the elements constitute. It should be clear by now that Levinas, on the whole, argues for a subject that is unified in the sense that it has its principle of unity within itself. This leads to the question of whether the identity of the subject is to be understood as being over and above the content

itself in order for it to be the content of *one* subject or if it nothing but the collection of contents.

The discussion Levinas enters here might be recognised as leading back to Kant's response to Hume's criticism of the notion of subjectivity. Applying his method of empirical skepticism to the major philosophical notions Hume claimed that he could not find any idea of the self within him. Based on his thought on ideas and impressions, where every idea – understood as a mental image – had to be derived from a corresponding impression – understood as sensations, passions or emotions – he went on to claim that the problem was inherent to the notion of self: “It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference” (Hume 1985, 299). But since he could not find the principle for this self or person within him, he went on to express what is known as the bundle theory of subjectivity. Discussing the different impressions supposedly unified in a self he says: “they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. ... [There is no] single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. ... There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, not *identity* in different” (Ibid., 300–301).

Kant's response to this problem was offered in his theory of the transcendental unity of apperception. By first arguing how all our representations, given that they are to be understood as *one* representation, presuppose the synthesis of apprehension which unifies the manifold offered within an intuition, Kant goes on to claim that this synthesis of apprehension also have to take place a priori, in order for us to have representations of time and space. By taking his Copernican revolution into account – in which Kant turns his attention from the notion of the object as fully real and constituted by itself, to the necessary conditions for the possibility of the object *qua* object for us – Kant claims that “the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations” (Kant 2000, A105). But given this necessity, what is the status of the consciousness in question? This is where the transcendental apperception enters the scene: “Every necessity has a transcendental condition as its ground. A transcendental ground must therefore be found for the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions ... Now this original and transcendental condition is nothing other than the **transcendental apperception**. That which should **necessarily** be represented as numerically

identical cannot be thought of as such through empirical data. There must be a condition that precedes all experience and makes the latter itself possible” (Ibid., A106–107). Kant thus grants that Hume was right in that the unifying self is not accessible through experiences, but having argued that this self is a necessary condition for experience itself, it has to be found a priori as a transcendental condition. This transcendental unity of apperception is finally described as the possibility of ascribing an “I think” to every representation: “The **I think** must **be able** to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in my that could not be thought at all. ... [O]nly because I can comprehend their manifold in a consciousness do I call them all together **my** representations; for otherwise I would have as multicolored, diverse a self as I have representations of which I am conscious” (Ibid., B132–134).

Kant’s response to the criticism of Hume is in Levinas’ mind deficient, mainly for two reasons: On the one hand Levinas claims that this transcendental unity imposes a formalism which he opposes as it only offers a formal principle of identity and thus breaking with Levinas’ phenomenological commitments, and on the other hand the Levinasian identity of the subject must be prior to any activity, as the fundamental level of the subject is a priori to activity. Because of this latter reason, the notion of psychism as it was discussed earlier is now inadequate. Psychism was described as involving both activity and passivity; the latter because not all of our inner life is characterised by activity as enjoyment shows. In so far as it involves activity, is not limited to – even if it includes – the subject’s representations of itself, but is rather to be understood as including a wider notion of self-relation where the crucial point is that the content of psychism is lived, whether they are represented or not. This characteristic concerns the understanding of psychism both in its active and passive form. But as psychism was described as the realm of spontaneity, in so far as the subject may overturn or revert the order of chronology through of memory and projection by having the freedom of relating to the moments of one’s identity, psychism fundamentally entails an activity of the self. This activity was described as the subject’s ability to revert the conditions of its situation, as if it was unrestrained from the world. But this freedom of psychism does not presuppose the actual worldlessness of psychism, and as we have seen, one of the fundamental presuppositions of Levinas’ thought is that the subject is always already embodied and located within the world. It is therefore obvious that another principle of identity is needed, and that this is to be found within enjoyment. Had we stayed with psychism, without analysing the world-relations of the subject, we could easily have fallen prey for what Levinas

describes as the “temptation of idealism”. But through enjoyment we are to learn that the activity of psychism rests on a prior passivity, wherein lies Levinas’ answer to the problem posed by Hume and Kant.

Levinas’ solution to the problem as it is posed by Hume and Kant will be discussed further in the following subchapter. As for now, a few more words about the relation between the identity in enjoyment and in psychism are in order. Levinas repeatedly claims that enjoyment concretises psychism. This concretisation is though not to be understood as a limitation of the spontaneity of youth, but rather of a grounding of it in concrete bodily existence in the world. This self-relation in the world-relation is fundamental for the understanding of subjectivity, as the subject finds itself in a world that is not of its own construction: “This relation of myself with myself is accomplished when I *stand* [*me tiens*] in the world which precedes me as an absolute of an unrepresentable antiquity. To be sure, I cannot *think* the horizon in which I find myself to be an absolute, but I *stand* in it as in an absolute. Standing there is precisely different from ‘thinking’. The bit of earth that supports me is not only my object; it supports my experience of objects” (TI, 138–139/146). In enjoyment Levinas postulates an identity given prior to the activity of the self. This passive¹⁷ principle of identity is not to be understood as static, but rather as dynamic. Levinas claims that a sense of identity is thought to be intrinsic to enjoyment itself and he describes it as a “contraction of the ego”. Enjoyment is thought to involve a movement by virtue of which, we might talk about an identity: “Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution. What is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is a vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self. For the I is not the *support* of enjoyment. ...; the I is the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment” (TI, 118/123). This metaphorical description of subjectivity as a “coiling” or “involution” shows an identity which is neither the result of a substantial basis, nor the result of an activity of the subject in question. It is now time to try to combine the different aspects of psychism and enjoyment and see how Levinas claims that this principle of identity is to be understood as happiness, and how this principle is related to the idea of dwelling.

¹⁷ Levinas uses the term ‘passive’ in a dual sense. Sometimes it is to be understood negatively, as an undermining of the self. Other times it is to be understood as the absence of activity. It is in the latter sense I use the word. It could easily have been systematically replaced by the terms ‘affectivity’ and ‘receptivity’, which Levinas often treats as synonymous, but the term ‘passivity’ reveals more distinctly the non-active characteristics of the subject.

4.3 Dependency and independency

Enjoyment has been shown to consist of two main aspects: the affective relation to the elements and the “living from...”, the latter of which is the principle of identity in the subject’s relation to the world. The relation to the elements and the “living from...” are united by the notion of sensibility. As the elements are to be understood as pure qualities, there is a sense in which we relate to the elements even when we are relating to the world of things, and that is the “living from...”, namely the experiential dimension of all the things that we do and surround us with, be they contingent activities and contents or existential conditions for our lives. As was discussed in subchapter 4.2.2, these are contents and activities are not to be understood as objects of representations, but immediate contents of a lived life. The difference between enjoyment as it is examined in “living from...” and in relation with the elements, is that whereas the elements by virtue of their nature could not be represented, the enjoyment of the living life, concerns many objects that can be represented, and, in fact, concerns even the act of representation itself: “enjoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life – it embraces them” (TI, 111/114). But enjoyment itself is not an act of representation. The principle of identity in enjoyment resides in the separation it involves, and this is manifested by two separable moments: the happiness of enjoyment and the dwelling.

4.3.1 Happiness

The happiness of enjoyment is the love of life, which lays bare the duality in all the activities we engage in and the contents we engage with. This duality rests on the fact that while these contents and activities remain distinct from us they constitute the content of our life. This constitution is again to be taken in two senses: on the one hand the constitution entails that without these contents the particular life in question would not have been realised (or, to put it otherwise, something else would be constituting this particular life), and on the other hand that they are constituting in the sense that they make up the existential conditions for life itself. This latter sense is emphasised by the fact that Levinas often calls the contents nourishment. The subject relates to both of these two ways in which the content of its life is necessary – as actual content and as nourishment – in terms of happiness: “life’s relation with

its own dependence on the things is enjoyment – which, as happiness, is independence” (TI, 112/114). The relation of enjoyment thus includes our relations of representations and to things along with our relations with the elements and with the metaphysical other.

In the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas analysed the contrast between need and desire. Enjoyment understood in terms of nourishment is a need that can be fulfilled. As Levinas would put it, we can quench our thirst, we can assuage our hunger, but this does not mark the independence or happiness of enjoyment. This independency does not reside in the suspension and possible absence of needs. Alongside with this model of need, Levinas understands the enjoyment on the model desire, which he claims cannot be fulfilled. Understood on this model the importance of enjoyment is not that it can sometimes be fulfilled, but rather that we thrive on the contents of enjoyment, and in fact also on our needs. We enjoy them. The notion of happiness entails a separation and independency because it is intimately connected with the personal identity of the I: “because life is happiness it is personal. The personality of the person, the ipseity of the I, which is more than the particularity of the atom and of the individual, is the particularity of the happiness of enjoyment” (TI, 115/119). The sense of personality that Levinas associates with enjoyment is not to be understood as the mere empirical claim that we as individuals have different preferences in our enjoyment. It is rather to be understood in connection to the metaphorical description of identity described earlier in this essay, as the involution or contraction of the I in enjoyment.

There is a sense in which enjoyment inherently entails an “I”, as the enjoyment is always some “I”’s enjoyment; but this “I” is never solely a formal trait. It is always deepened by the content of its enjoyment. The inherent “I” of enjoyment can thus not be understood to be a mere formal trait as it is always concretised in relation to its content. This identity is furthermore not a static identity¹⁸, as the metaphorical description of the identity in enjoyment as a contraction or involution indicates. Rather, these metaphors imply a dynamic identity that continuously deepens. And even though this identity might be reflected upon and represented, the identity is not itself the *result of* any reflection or representation: “It is an existence *for itself* – but not, initially, in view of its own existence. Nor is it a representation of self by self”

¹⁸ When discussing the independence of happiness, Levinas contrasts this with the independence of the substance: “Substances are only what they are” (TI, 113/116). In this context independence may be understood as identity.

(TI, 118/122). The metaphorical descriptions Levinas offers of this kind of identity as a “contraction”, an “involution”, an “eddy” and a “coiling” spiral, are intended to escape the question of how we might draw an identity out of the flux of the manifold sensational experiences and is Levinas’ response to the problem he sees in Hume’s bundle theory of subjectivity and Kant’s theory of transcendental subjectivity.

We might wonder how these metaphors for subjectivity capture the way the personal identity of the self is constituted, and Levinas does not offer any further qualifications as to their explanatory role. But it is clear that they are not to be taken as mere postulates, but rather as attempts to offer better descriptions of the nature of our sensibility and affectivity as human subjects. Whereas the dependency and the independency of the “living from...” seems plausible as it is offered as a description of the existential dimension of our way of being in the world, the sense of identity inherent in enjoyment – the sense of involution and contraction – is more complicated. How is it that the involution of the “I” is not just an experiential description of how it feels to be a human being in the world, but also a principle of identity? How does a deepening of identity – another metaphor – follow from involution or contraction of the self, and how does this deepening avoid Hume’s question of how the different moments of sensation constitute the sensation of one particular subject? The core idea that answers these questions is the way in which the fact that something is lived, constitutes identity. As all kinds of representation are ruled out, we might follow two routes in answering these questions.

The first alternative is to claim that even though Levinas insists that the identity by “involution” is prior to any activity – both practical and theoretical – he does not manage to neither solve nor escape the problematic unity of the subject. Rather than showing that the subject is passive prior to all activity, the “involution” itself is a kind of activity, granting that it may be a sub-conscious movement. This movement, even though it is dependent on the content given in sensation, is not itself the movement of the sensation, as the subject as sensing retains a distance from what it senses. Thus a certain kind of formalism remains in that a transcendental activity is still necessary to make sense of the identity in enjoyment.

The second alternative is not as critical and goes like this: Rather than understanding the subject as that which unifies the stream of experiences by actively unifying the sensations into experience, there is a certain intrinsic unity to this stream as all sensations entail a certain *mineness*. All sensations belong to someone, and this someone is never anonymous; it is

always one particular person whose sensations these are. Such an interpretation turns the tables on the problem, for instead of asking how sensations and experiences are unified, which leads to the question of the unity of the unifier – the subject – the sensations are assumed to be intrinsically unified by a common property, namely that of a particular *mineness*. Thus, no prior activity is necessary in order to show how the subject unifies the sensations, and the subject is shown to be primarily passive. As every sensation has a *mineness* along with an experiential influence on the sensing subject, the identity that is entailed by sensation is passive and non-formalistic; it is lived. Even though this identity in its turn is evolved by the activity of psychism through memory and projection, its fundamental sense does not rest on any activity.

As Levinas himself never engages explicitly with these questions in depth, the way in which he is to be interpreted remains unclear. These two alternatives have been outlined even if they are opposed, as the former gives prevalence to the notion of activity associated with psychism, even if this activity turns out to be transcendental, while the latter gives prevalence to passivity. I will consider the latter alternative – in so far as the property of *mineness* is not understood as a mere formal trait, but rather bound to a particular intimacy between the subject and the experiences – to be the most promising as it seems to avoid the problem of transcendental activity. But this approach quickly meets its own challenges. One of these problems arises if we claim that the subject is unified by having a set of experiences that all are unified by belonging to one subject, we seem to be running in circles. To avoid this circle we will have to claim one of two things. Either we can claim that the unity of the contents of consciousness is more independent in that the *mineness* does not refer to the subject, which is to understand this *mineness* as a formal trait. In that case, the subject is nothing over and above the unified contents. Or, rather we will have to claim that the unity of the subject is somewhat more independent, and thus something over and above these contents. These two alternatives each have their own merits. The latter agrees with Levinas' clear-cut statements where he claims that the sensations and contents of our life are separate from this life itself: "What we live from and enjoy is not the same as that life itself. ... Though I live my life, the life I live and the fact of living it nonetheless remain distinct, even though it is true that the this life itself continually and essentially becomes its own content" (TI, 122/127). There is something more to subjectivity as consciousness than the mere sum of the contents: "Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life" (TI,

112/115). Yet, the former alternative captures a possibility that remains open within the notion of “involution” as long as its sense is not specified clearly.

So far, two interpretations of the identity in enjoyment were proposed. The first gave prevalence to activity, while the second gave prevalence to passivity. Within this second interpretation, another two interpretations of the sense of *mineness* was offered. It is now time to try to extract what is useful from each of these interpretations and combine them to a coherent conception of Levinas’ notion of identity in enjoyment. A key to the possible solution is found in a paragraph where Levinas discusses the relationship between freedom and separation: “Freedom as the possibility of commencement, referring to happiness, to the marvel of the good time standing out from the continuity of the hours, is the production of the I ... Separation and atheism, these negative notions, are produced by positive events” (TI, 148/158). As psychism was produced by a positive event – by virtue of the youth of memory and projection – so is the happiness of enjoyment to be understood not as a static trait, but rather as an event *producing* the separation and identity in question. The separation is not a fact prior to the event itself, but this event should not be understood as an activity of the subject whose identity is in question. That any such event is necessary seems to be in line with most of what Levinas says throughout the book, as he tries to avoid making ontological claims about essences. What though, is the status of these events that produces separation and identity in enjoyment? As these events are not to be assimilated with activity, as they are not produced by the subject themselves, it becomes apparent that they are rather brought by the mere fact of our conscious bodily existence. Identity in this sense is not something we ourselves consciously produce, nor anything that is merely bestowed upon us, but rather something that is produced by virtue of our life is characterised by being a conscious bodily existence within a world. Thus, while it is true that the mere *mineness* of sensations is not a sufficient condition for personal identity, neither is the understanding of this identity as produced by the activity of the self accurate. It is rather the events brought about by sensation that constitute this identity. This is in accordance with an understanding of the subject in enjoyment as passively affective. In the happiness (or unhappiness) of enjoyment – both in the way the sensed constitute necessary conditions for our sensations and our life and the way in which we feel that these contents and activities constitutes the experiential dimension of our life – a *mineness* is implied, which by virtue of the events brought about by the sensations, develops a sense of identity. This is sense of Levinas’ claims when he describes the dawn of the self in enjoyment: “The upsurge of the self beginning in enjoyment, where the

substantiality of the I is apperceived not as the subject of the verb to be, but as implicated in happiness ... One becomes a subject of being not by assuming being but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment which is also an exaltation, an ‘above being’” (TI, 119/123–124). Likewise, this is the sense of Levinas’ claims when he shortly after expresses the non-formalism of this identity: “Individuation through happiness individuates a ‘concept’ whose comprehension and extension coincides; the individuation of the concept by self-identification constitutes the content of this concept” (TI, 120/124–125). This way of putting into words the subject as an individuation of a concept, is to be understood only metaphorically, as Levinas only a few pages earlier claims that the identity of the human subject has the particular trait of *not* being the individuation of a concept: “The ipseity of the I consist in remaining outside the distinction between the individual and the general” (TI, 118/122). Levinas’ notion of identity in enjoyment thus seems to rest on a quality of *mineness* in our experiences, produced by, and bound to, the positive event of our conscious bodily existence.

In enjoyment, we hold on to the exteriority in the sense that the relata of enjoyment is not to be understood in terms of construction and representation. In holding on to exteriority, Levinas claims that we are affirming of the world. But such an affirmation is not to be understood as ascribing the consciousness a positing role, as is the case with the Husserlian notion of *sense-bestowal*. We are not bestowing existence, but rather affirming existence in passivity. Through this affirmation, we also affirm the body. As Levinas’ idea of nourishment entailed, our bodily existence reveals our being to be vulnerable and conditioned, but this is then countered by the way in which we draw an identity from this existence: “The body naked and indigent is the very reverting, irreducible to the thought, of representation into life, of the subjectivity that represents into life which is sustained by these representations and *lives of them*” (TI, 127/134). This bodily existence, which then is shown to be the ground of our practical engagement with the world as labour, eminently exposes the duality of dependency and independency. The practical engagement with the world made possible by bodily existence, of which Levinas exemplifies with labour, destruction and murder, differs from the theoretical engagement he identifies as intentionality, by assuming an exteriority, which Husserl suspends by his epoché: “To assume exteriority is to enter into a relation with it such that the same determines the other while being determined by it. ... The way in which the same is determined by the other, and which delineates the plane in which the negating acts themselves are situated, is precisely the way designated above as ‘living from...’” (TI,

128/134). Exteriority in this context is not to be understood as the exteriority of the Other, but simply the consciousness-independent reality of the world, and the things located therein. And these activities which Levinas understands as negating acts, is not the way we relate to the radical Other, but are the characteristic manner in which we relate to the world through labour.

It is finally important to note that the separation and identity analysed in enjoyment is only accessible through the first-person perspective, as was the case with psychism. Subjectivity is discussed, not in terms of a substance, but in terms of the life and experiences of a *particular* subject. The choice of perspective does not in itself rule out the account of the subject as substance, as Descartes' meditations show, but it is here designating a preoccupation with the individual, following the example of, among many others, Heidegger and the existentialist tradition. Despite all the differences between existentialism as it got to be known through the works of Sartre and Heidegger, there is a common premise that the richness of human existence should be included in the account of subjectivity; and this is, as we have already discussed, the basis of both Heidegger's and Levinas' critique of the formalism of Kant, a formalism which is also to be found in the works of Husserl. That the account of the identity of the self in happiness is to be understood in the same manner is emphatically expressed in the following paragraph: "Happiness is a principle of individuation, but individuation in itself is conceivable only from within, through interiority. In the happiness of enjoyment is enacted the individuation, the auto-personification, the substantialization, and the independence of the self" (TI, 147/157).

4.3.2 Dwelling

The tension between the dependency of enjoyment through the need of nourishment and the corresponding independency through the happiness we derive from our needs allowed Levinas to argue for the subject's separation from the world by virtue of its identity. A similar separation is observable in the tension related to Levinas' notion of the dwelling. While the former separation is achieved by examining the subject's primordial passivity in relation to the world, the latter separation of dwelling expounds on this passivity by examining further the conditions of our corporal existence in the world. This corporal existence was exposed in the vulnerability of the needing body of enjoyment, but, along with dwelling, the body will now be shown to be the condition of labour and our further acquisitions in the world, which is

the way Levinas understands our practical engagement with the world of things. The notion of dwelling, showing that we are always existing within a world that precedes us, limits the plausibility of idealism and concretises the dependency of the subject. Our existence is corporal and dependent on both the world of culture and of nourishment: “the consciousness of a world is already consciousness *through* that world. Something of that world seen is an organ or an essential means of vision: the head, the eye, the eyeglasses, the light, the lamps, the books, the school” (TI, 153/163). There is no strict separation between the moments of analysed in enjoyment and dwelling, but in general, we might say that whereas the ‘living from...’ designates the how we relate to the world that surrounds us at a passive level, the notion of dwelling designates the manner in which we find ourselves located in the world in the first place.

The elemental world has already been shown to be that which surrounds us at all time, and the subject has been shown to relate passively to this world. But nevertheless, Levinas claims that we retain some independence from these elements, apart from the independence of happiness: “Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue by the domicile, which confers upon him an extraterritoriality” (TI, 131/138). This domicile, which Levinas calls the primary appropriation, makes the existence in the world, a presence “*within* what he [the subject] already possesses, such that we shall be able to say that the domicile, condition for all property, renders the inner life possible” (TI, 132/139). The idea of dwelling is primarily directed against certain existentialist’s thought of our being in the world in terms of “thrownness” and the broader idea of alienation from the world. Speaking about the subject, Levinas says: “he does not find himself brutally cast forth and forsaken in the world. Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness” (TI, 152/162). That this paragraph should be understood as a reference primarily directed towards Heidegger, is specified by another passage where Levinas explicitly introduces the Heideggerian term *Geworfenheit*, or thrownness (TI, 142/151). Levinas does not offer further specifications as to how he understands the thrown character of human life, but by describing it in terms of brutality and forsakenness – and considering that these references are a part of Levinas’ attempt to show how the human life is always endowed with richness of content – it seems warranted to understand these references in connection to the aforementioned critique of care. Common to Levinas’ understanding of both of these terms is the sense in which they imply an existence in the world in which the subject’s existence itself is threatened. Whereas this in care was interpreted by Levinas as “the naked will to be” – a conflation that has

already been criticised – this threat, as understood in terms of *Geworfenheit*, implies an opposition between the subject and the world, an opposition which alienates the subject and leads it to get “caught up in the *other* [*autre*] that limits it and negates it, *suffers* from this alterity¹⁹” (TI, 164/176). It was in order to refute this opposition that Levinas claimed that our basic relation to the world is characterised by enjoyment.

Upon comparing the notions of dwelling and *Geworfenheit*, we might wonder whether the difference between them really rests on Levinas’ claim that the world of the *Geworfenheit* is threatening. There are some important similarities between the terms. First of all, Levinas seems to agree on the first characteristic of the thrownness of Dasein’s – or the subject’s – existence, namely that it is “a naked ‘that it is and has to be’” (BT, 173). This fact of existence, where we always find ourselves in a world, is not of our choosing, something which has existential importance as Heidegger claims that this fact is not to be mistaken for any factuality associated with the present-at-hand, but rather is to be understood as a characteristic of Dasein’s existence. This latter point indicates the second similarity as Levinas agrees with the claim that the thrown character of human existence is always taken up in this existence itself, that is to say, that it has existential importance. In Levinas’ thought this is reflected in the way we relate to the world prior to any activity by the enjoyment of elements which are incessantly moving towards us. This understanding of our openness towards the world is to a certain degree corresponded by the Heideggerian idea of the moods of *Befindlichkeit*, usually translated as state of mind. Both enjoyment and *Befindlichkeit* reveals the subject’s openness towards the world, prior to any theoretical or practical activity. Thirdly, even though Levinas introduces the notion of enjoyment in order to counter the rhetoric of Heidegger’s and Sartre’s philosophy, he himself also describes our being in the world as threatened by the insecurity of the elements.²⁰ As Levinas’ subject relates to the world in different ways highlighting its changing role (from nourishment to threat), the same can be said about Heidegger’s Dasein since the sense in which the existence of Dasein is

¹⁹ Both the term ‘other’ and ‘alterity’ are here to be taken in their non-specific sense; they are not to be understood as implying that the world is a metaphysical other or represent a radical alterity.

²⁰ Such a relation to the fact of our existence, was dramatically described in *On Escape*, where Levinas describes the existence we are thrown into in similar terms as he describes *Geworfenheit*: “The elementary truth that *there is being* – a being that has value and weight – is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and seriousness. ... It is not that the suffering with which life threatens us renders it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it” (Levinas 1998, 94–95/52).

understood as threatened by the world is, in Heidegger's treatment, only *one* mode of *Befindlichkeit* (BT, 179–180).

With these similarities in mind, we can approach the differences that appear. The main difference does not seem to lie, as Levinas indicates in the passages referred to above, in that *Geworfenheit* indicates an existence that is brutally thrown into a world that threatens it, as this is also apparent in the subject's relation with the elements. Nor does the difference lie in a relation between the world and the subject characterised by negation, as this is present also in the Levinasian notion of labour, with which he claims we counter the insecurity of the elements. Rather, the difference lies in that in Levinas' philosophy, this character of thrownness that marks our existence is supplemented by the independence and privacy introduced by the dwelling. Another important difference lies in the manner in which the subject takes the fact of thrownness up into its existence. Heidegger claims that it is by the moods of *Befindlichkeit* that Dasein is revealed to itself as thrown into the world. These moods are not strictly to be neither interior nor exterior: "States-of-mind [*Befindlichkeit*] are so far from being reflected upon, that precisely what they do is to assail Dasein in its unreflecting devotion to the 'world' with which it is concerned and on which it expends itself. A mood assails us. It comes neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside', but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being" (BT, 175–176). Levinas shares the claim that our primary relation to the world is unreflected, but he does not endorse the claim that the moods seem to imply, namely that Dasein and the world, at a fundamental level, cannot be separated. By refuting the Heideggerian relation between Dasein and the world, Levinas also contests Heidegger's efforts in showing how *Befindlichkeit* constitutes the condition for sensibility and affectivity: "only because the 'senses' [*die 'Sinne'*] belong ontologically to an entity whose kind of Being is Being-in-the-world with a state-of-mind, can they be 'touched' by anything or 'have a sense for' something in such a way that what touches them shows itself in an affect. ... *Existentially, a state-of-mind implies a disclosive submission to the world, out of which we can encounter something that matters to us*" (BT, 176–177). As we have already seen, Levinas claims that sensibility and affection, and the correlative passivity of the subject, are the characteristics of our primary relation to the world. He agrees that they designate an openness towards the world, but not that this openness also relies on a mood, even though the term 'enjoyment' could indicate otherwise. A third difference has already been discussed in an earlier subchapter in relation to care. As care, and the related notions of concern and solicitude, unifies the important ontological characteristics of Heidegger's Dasein, among

them that it is thrown into the world,²¹ Dasein is understood as a being whose Being is an issue for it. For Heidegger, this leads to Dasein's possibility to lead either an authentic or an inauthentic life. Since Levinas discards the fundamental role of care, he also rejects the notion of authenticity and the way in which they constitute a structural whole which might offer a complete analytic of Dasein.

The notion of dwelling is intended to show how we – after relating to the world through enjoyment, and after discovering that our existence is threatened by the insecurity of the elements – relate to the world through labour. Dwelling is the condition for labour and consists of two main ideas: that of recollection and of first possession. The latter notion, which Levinas argues is a transcendental condition for labour and further acquisition is the way we always move towards the world from somewhere. Unlike the elements – which seemingly come from nowhere as pure qualities – the subject enters the world from a ground already acquired. Levinas expresses this idea in terms of habitation, describing this “somewhere” as home, in order to counter the existentialist idea of alienation from the world. The notion of first possession expresses two core ideas: first that we always find ourselves located in a certain situation and in certain circumstances which is the foundation for our further relation to the world, and secondly that this location is not characterised by being a foreign place, but rather by familiarity. I will not discuss this idea of first possession any further, but certain of its aspects are also present in the idea of recollection.

4.3.3 Recollection

The notion of recollection also answers the same question of how an identity is possible within the flux of experiences, but on a different level, building upon what was discussed as the happiness of enjoyment. Recollection is, in contrast to the involution in enjoyment, characterised by activity as it “designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a larger attention to oneself, one's possibilities, and the situation. It is already a movement of attention freed from immediate enjoyment, for no longer deriving its freedom from the agreeableness of the elements” (TI, 154/164–165). It is our ability to gather ourselves even though we are always in the midst of a situation, in order to assess our

²¹ The three main characteristics as they are discussed in *Being and Time* is existentiality (the being-ahead-of-itself), thrownness or facticity (the being-already-in-a-world) and falling (the being-alongside). The issue of how these are related and unified by care is an important issue, but lies beyond the scope of this essay.

circumstances and evaluate our possibilities. As such it is comparable to psychism, and may be described as psychism concretised in view of its world-relations. The recollection is a response to the insecurity of the elements that is experienced as threatening, and marks a separation that, in contrast to happiness, is characterised by acts of reflection and representation. From the exposition above it should be clear that Levinas' main argument is that any activity of the subject is grounded on a prior passivity and affectivity which opens the subject up to the realities of the world and itself offers a sense of identity. Thus recollection is secondary to the identity in enjoyment and is to be understood as deepening the sense of identity already established by the happiness of enjoyment.

Recollection, already implying representation and reflection founds the basis of Levinas' analyses of our extended engagement with the world, which he understands in terms of labour and possession. The world as first analysed in terms of the elements was characterised by, amongst others, two important traits: that the elements were not supported by any substance and that they came towards the subject incessantly. That they apparently come from nowhere is the reason why Levinas calls the elements mythical. But this "mythical" format of the element, exposed by enjoyment leads us to the foundation and necessity of labour: "This coming from nowhere, from 'something' that is not, appearing without there being anything that appears – and consequently *coming always*, without my being able to *possess* the source – delineates the future of sensibility and enjoyment" (TI, 141/150). As the elements are inherently insecure, the dependence-relation the subject stands in with them is correspondingly shown to be threatened: "the I needs the world, which exalts it. The freedom of enjoyment thus is experienced as limited. Limitation is not due to the fact that the I has not chosen its birth and thus is already and henceforth in situation, but to the fact that the plenitude of its instant of enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys, the fact that joy remains a chance and a stroke of luck" (TI, 144/153). This is where labour and possession enters into the account of the subject's relation to the world. The subject is shown to be delivered over to the world of elements and thus exposed in its vulnerability. These two characteristics of the subject play a central role in Levinas ethical ideas.

The importance of recollection, apart from being the ground of labour, lies in Levinas' answer to the question on how the distance produced by recollection is achieved. Rather than returning to the notion of enjoyment and showing that recollection rests on the separation

already produced by the happiness of enjoyment, Levinas introduces the notion of intimacy. In a passage that will be quoted at length, he confronts the general position that understands our relation with the world as characterised by estrangement and opposition: “familiarity and intimacy are produced as a gentleness that spreads over the face of things. This gentleness is not only a conformity of nature with the needs of the separated being, which from the first enjoys them and constitutes itself as separate, as I, in that enjoyment, but is a gentleness coming from an affection for that I. The intimacy which familiarity already presupposes is an *intimacy with someone*. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human” (TI, 155/165). The familiarity of the world is not the result of its subordination to our will and labour, but is rather grounded on the fact that the world we inhabit is always already shared. Not only do the world of the elements present itself as a world we enjoy, but when this world turns out to be insecure and our life in it to be threatened, the world of things which is the result of labour, shows itself to be already partially prepared by others. As our relation to the future as death, along with offering a principle of identification also showed that we stood in relation with something radically different from us, so do the idea of intimacy: ”The nothingness of the future [which the insecurity of the elements exposed], we shall see, turns into an interval of time in which possession and labor is inserted. The passage from instantaneous enjoyment to the fabrication of things refers to habitation, to economy, which presupposes the welcoming of the Other [autrui]” (TI, 146/156).

4.3.4 Intimacy, or the familiarity of the world

At this point Levinas introduces his highly debated notion of the discrete Other, which he designated as “the Woman”. Due to the limited scope of this essay, I will not engage in the extensive debate that these passages have provoked, but I would like to offer some remarks concerning the interpretation of these passages in so far as they are relevant for the exposition of our being in the world as characterised by both dependence and independence and the related debate of alienation from the world. First of all, it should be noted that whereas I cannot understand why Levinas feels it necessary to introduce gender categories in order to designate different metaphysical notions, the distinction between the discrete other and the Other in its proper sense is important, since the discrete other introduces familiarity and intimacy in our relation to the world, whereas the proper Other introduces responsibility. Richard Cohen tries to understand this function of the discrete other in his essay *The Metaphysics of Gender*, and claims that these categories are simple metaphors, unproblematic

because they are used as a “purely conventional gesture” (Cohen 1994, 198). While explaining Levinas’ use of the terms, and clarifying that Levinas is not designating men and women to different metaphysical categories, this does not justify his use of gendered metaphors, and only partly address the criticism of these terms. While I do agree with the interpretation that Levinas’ use of the terms “feminine” and “Woman” are metaphorical, as do the majority of Levinas’ interpreters²², it is still a contested issue at what level these metaphors are intended to be understood.

A common interpretation, here represented by Diane Perpich and Cathrine Chalier, who both agree with the metaphorical interpretation, claims that the feminine is intended to serve the ontological function of turning the ego from the egoism that characterises enjoyment to the responsibility that characterises ethical subjectivity. This interpretation claims that it is by virtue of the feminine that “natural life turns into ethical life” (Chalier 1991, 119) and that the alienating activity of the “virile spirit” is put into question. While Perpich to a large degree accepts Chalier’s account, she raises a question she claims remains unthematized, namely the question of how the feminine is able to fulfil the described function: “*who converts her?* Is she ‘naturally’ more ethical than he is? Is she inherently possessed of a conscience? ... Like the role of the pineal gland in Descartes’ ‘resolution’ of the mind-body relation, the feminine face is a mechanism meant to serve as the interface between incommensurable orders” (Perpich 2008, 104).

These problems hinge on the important question of how we should understand Levinas’ pseudo-genealogical account of subjectivity. On the one hand we can understand Levinas’ analyses of the different levels of subjectivity at face value and treat the subject as something that first is egoistic, and which will remain egoistic, until its conduct is interrupted, initially by the intimacy of the discrete other, and later by the radical Other. Such an account is warranted by the letter of Levinas’ narrative, where he throughout the book discusses the subject in terms of critical events which turns it from one phase to another. On the other hand

²² This interpretation is warranted by Levinas’ use of metaphorical descriptions throughout his work, and in this case by a specific clarification he offers: “Need one add that there is no question here of defying ridicule by maintaining the empirical truth or countertruth that every home *in fact* presupposes a woman? The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place – and the empirical absence of the human being of ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there” (TI, 157–158/169).

we might try to understand these analyses in light of the few methodological comments Levinas makes at the beginning of the book, where he specifies that he will follow a transcendental and phenomenological approach. This allows us to understand that, while Levinas will insist on the necessity of events such as the encounter with both the discrete other and the radical Other – something he does in order to avoid an essentialistic account of the subject – he also claims that these encounters have always already occurred. This view of Levinas' account of subjectivity does not claim that there are distinguishable levels of subjectivity in actual existence, but that these differentiations are analytical tools. By this account, there is no purely egoistic subject, in Levinas specialised understanding of the term, deprived of an encounter with the Other. The ideas of intimacy and the discrete other is to express the way we are always located within a social context which is essential both to the way in which we relate to the world, but also to our ability to attune ourselves to the responsibility that arises from the relation to the radical Other. The discrete other thus designates an aspect of our social condition, even though this condition is constituted by particular persons. It should thus not be understood as identified by a particular gender or a particular person, the latter since the person is not to be identified as fully coinciding with the role attributed to the discrete other. It is rather because the particular person contributes to the social context that it plays this role, along with multiple others. Perpich's question thus seems to disappear as soon as we assume that the terms are metaphorical and as long as we keep Levinas' pseudo-genealogical method in mind. From what I have said so far in this essay, it should be clear that I endorse this second of the two view of Levinas' method offered in the previous paragraph. I will discuss this through two considerations.

A first consideration is that the literal understanding of Levinas' genealogical style seems to be based on an inadequate understanding of the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental in Levinas' thought. This is most apparent in the conflation between the analysis of subjectivity and actual subjectivity. The differentiations Levinas make in *Totality and Infinity* – differentiations we have discussed in terms of the subject of psychism, the subject of enjoyment and the ethical subject – are to highlight the different traits of subjectivity, but is never claimed to be actualisable in separation. Thus, the question of how the feminine must be constituted in order to be able to overturn an egoistic subject, may be avoided if we understand Levinas' discussion of the dwelling and the discrete other in its transcendental sense. This sense of the term 'transcendental' denotes something which has always already happened. By this I do not wish to designate these events to a sphere separable

from the empirical. They are not formal transcendental events, as this would contradict what we discussed in the subchapter on happiness. These events are surely to be understood as taking place in our life and they are repeatable. This sense of the term ‘transcendental’ stems from the fact that the empirical and the transcendental does not stand in a stark opposition in Levinas’ philosophy, as it does in Kant’s philosophy. The transcendental is not to be taken as a priori, but merely as necessary conditions for a certain possibility. The transcendental does not designate a sphere of its own, separated from the empirical, as it does in Kant’s philosophy. Throughout our discussion on subjectivity, we have encountered several events that are to be understood as transcendental conditions to the notion of subjectivity: among others the youth of psychism, the involution and happiness of enjoyment and the meeting with the discrete other. By describing these events as always already realised I claim that we cannot consider human actuality, our life in the world, without or before such events. The notion of subjectivity presupposes these events. That being said, these events are concretely realised in the world. It might sound strange to claim that these events have always already been concretely realised when we keep in mind that human life unfolds temporally. Is there no moment before this realisation? This confusion might be eliminated when we consider the source of these events. They are produced by our existence itself; in so far as we live, the events are actualised. There is no subjectivity prior to the movements of psychism, prior to the involution of psychism, or prior to the intimacy of the human existence as coexistence. In analysis there is of course no metaphysical impossibility in imagining a life prior to these events, say for example prior to the meeting with the discrete other or the radical Other, but as Levinas presupposes, along with most existentialist and ethical thinkers, human existence is not considered and analysed deprived of these events. In the example at hand concerning the intimacy of the world, Levinas thus claims that our being in the world is never to be understood as solipsistic.

Thus, what Levinas is trying to describe is not an already virile subject, now being challenged by a feminine spirit, but rather how our relation to the world is always marked by its familiarity, both because it is the world as already partially prepared by others as it is shared, and because our worldly existence is always *co*-existence. The latter point of coexistence is also to be found in the philosophy of Heidegger, with whom Levinas stands in a constant dialogue with. Even though the idea of solitude is a recurrent theme in Heidegger’s philosophy he claims that the self cannot be thought without being-with other Daseins [Mitsein] and being-alongside things [Sein-bei]; along with being-one’s-self [Selbstsein] they

are constituents of the being-in-the-world. But Levinas criticises Heidegger's notion of being-with because this coexistence is not sufficient for the ethical as Levinas understands it, since it cannot accommodate for a relation with the radical Other. Furthermore, in *Totality and Infinity* the notion of coexistence also indicates that our primordial relation to the world is not one of alienation, but of familiarity. And it is this latter point that indicates the main importance of the notion of dwelling and the related notion of intimacy. While happiness showed how our existence in the world was characterised by familiarity rather than alienation without reference to other people, dwelling includes such a reference, and opens up for the ethical relations Levinas later wants to examine.

The second consideration is closely related to the first as it also arises in relation to these thought on the transcendental and the empirical in Levinas' philosophy, and is a worry put into words by Perpich: "If the ego were preordained to an ethical life, either by the possession of inherent social instinct or by a naturally occurring moral sensibility, its goodness would also be predetermined. Like the acorn that can become an oak or nothing at all, an ego preordained to ethical responsibility would flower or wither without its essence ever being put into question; the only question would be whether environmental conditions were in favor of it or against it. If ethics is conceived, as it most assuredly is in Levinas, as that which breaks with nature and is the advent of the human ..., it cannot come about in the natural course of the ego's life in enjoyment" (Perpich 2008, 10). The problem raised by Perpich rests on two important assumptions: Firstly, that the subject needs to be turned towards the ethical in the genealogical sense discussed above, and secondly, that the alternative to such a genealogical reading is essentialistic. I have tried to criticise such a genealogical reading by offering a metaphorical reading of these passages, and thus termed Levinas' narrative style "pseudo-genealogical". I have also tried to rebut the second assumption, since there is a meaningful distinction between empirical events that are discussable in terms of before and after, and empirical events where any considerations of "before" in actuality seems invalid. Levinas' account of subjectivity is an account of what it is to be human, and the discussions of the advent of the human is intended to distinguish between different levels of analytical complexity. To be a human subject is to always already be in these relations, the self-relation, the different world-relations and the relation to both the discrete other and the radical Other. That does not lead to static essentialism, as these relations are produced by events, but we cannot consider the subject before these events. With that said, the fact that we always are in these relations does not mean that we are ethical in the normative sense that Perpich intends

above. The transcendental level of Levinas philosophy – a level we have called the proto-ethical – is to show the conditions of ethics, and to show that we are already engaged in these conditions. We can of course ignore certain of the implication of our worldly existence, we can ignore all calls for aid and justice – and we often do – but we cannot break with our worldly existence and our engagement with others as humans. Does this designate the ethical dimension of human nature? To a certain degree it does, in the sense that to be human is to have these relations. But not in the essentialistic sense of nature, as these relations still need to be produced. Thus, the events described above – most importantly the meeting with the discrete other and the radical Other – are not to be understood as indicating that we naturally behave ethical in the sense that we assume responsibility, as these events have always already been actualised. Our ethical conduct is not the result of mere conditioning, as Levinas thought of psychism is intended to show. The events have always already happened and are repeated throughout our lives, but to act according to them still presupposes existential commitments, in the sense of how we choose to lead our lives. This latter point will be discussed further in the final chapter on the relation with the human Other.

4.3.5 Extraterritoriality

Levinas' description of the location of dwelling as in the extraterritorial is intended to counter certain of the interpretations that might follow from understanding the human existence as necessarily located in a world. The duality of dependency and independency expressed in our existence described as worldly and as extraterritorial, is parallel to the duality analysed in our relation to both the world of elements and the world of things. While our relation to the world of the elements was characterised by our passivity towards the surrounding elements which constituted the nourishment and content of our lives, we simultaneously lifted ourselves above this dependency by virtue of happiness, which allowed us to derive a rich sense of identity from the relation. The same is the case with the world of things, which is the result of human labour in reaction to the insecurity of the elements, we derive a sense of identity both from the enjoyment of this activity and its content, and by our ability to recollect in the midst of the world, and thus raise above the conditions of our situations. We are thus not merely conditioned by the elemental world nor do we merely melt into a structure of practical finalities in the world of things. We are not merely thrown into a world which primarily stands in opposition to us, but we live in a world that also nourishes us so that we may sustain our existence and a world in which we are already at home, since it is a world that is shared.

The notion of extraterritoriality is to capture the sense in which the situation and circumstances we find ourselves in, and from which we move towards the world from within the world, is a place of familiarity: “*Recollection* and *representation* are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* or a Home. But the interiority of the home is made of extraterritoriality in the midst of the elements of enjoyment with which life is nourished. This extraterritoriality has a positive side. It is produced in the gentleness or the warmth of intimacy” (TI, 150/161). The term ‘extraterritoriality’ thus both express the separation from the world entailed by dwelling, and the fact that whereas the world may be described in the third-person perspective, the dwelling and intimacy can only be accessed through the first-person perspective.

5 The merits and limits of the vitalistic account

In this essay I have examined Levinas' notion of subjectivity in terms of personal identity. I have limited myself to the pre-ethical level of subjectivity for two main reasons. On the one hand this limitation allows us to appreciate the fact that Levinas defends a notion of subjectivity as singularity along with his idea of the radical Other as singular. On the other hand it shows that the idea of a passive subject is not only reflected in the ethical relation with the radical Other, but also in our fundamental relation to the world. Even though the ethical thought of Levinas has not been discussed in this essay so far, I want to introduce the notion of the singularity of the Other in this chapter, in order for us to see the impact the notion of the singularity of the self may have on Levinas' thought. The singularity of the Other will be introduced by way of the subject's relation to it, namely through the expressions and appeals of the Other. Through an analysis of Levinas' claims about this singularity and the notion of expression, I want to show that Levinas is exposed to the criticism that his thought cannot account for the notion of normativity. That being said, it is important to emphasize that this analysis is done against the spirit of Levinas' thought. Levinas would easily claim that this analysis itself was a demonstration of totalising thought. But before we can discuss these issues further, some groundwork is in order.

The singularity of the self was shown to be produced by virtue of a set of principles of identity. The principle of identity offered in psychism defended a notion of identity produced by the subject's ability to relate to its own circumstances by adopting them. This active principle of identity was then shown to be grounded on a passive principle of identity produced by our relation to the world in which we are always already located. None of these principles entail a notion of self-representation, a term which is secondary and dependent on the two basic principles. Rather, the identity which is produced is to be understood as resulting from the subject's *living*. But as we saw, this idea of lived identity was difficult to capture without metaphors, and Levinas used images such as "involution" and "contraction". Levinas is of course not the only one to claim that the inner life resists representation; Bergson is one of his important associates. Similarly to Levinas, Bergson describes this lived identity in vitalistic terms, which is to say that he uses descriptions grounded in the actual life of the subject as it is experienced from the first-person perspective. There is though also

another tradition which defends a notion of the identity of the self in a way which might be described as giving prevalence to the practical and the lived over the theoretical. This is the tradition of those who understand subjectivity in terms of a practical self-relation, a tradition which both Heidegger and Sartre have represented in this essay.

Of more recent philosophers such an approach has been utilised by Charles Larmore. In this chapter I want to briefly note the similarities and the differences between the normative account of the self as it is presented by Charles Larmore and Levinas' vitalistic account. Subsequently I want to show what is lacking in Levinas' account of subjectivity, a lack which becomes apparent when he tries to move from the pre-ethical level of psychism and enjoyment to the ethical level of the relation to the Other. The problem is twofold: On the one hand, we observe that Levinas' defence of the singularity of the self opens up the question of whether the singularity of the Other is presented through "revelation" or through analogy from the singularity of the self. To put it in other words: Is this singularity, as expressed by the Other, presented to the subject without the subject's contribution or does it rest on an analogy from the subject itself? On the other hand, the tension between the Other as presented through revelation or through analogy leaves Levinas open to the criticism of whether he has offered an adequate account of normativity. It might seem that his critique of the notion of authenticity could have eliminated a possible solution to the tension is Levinas' account.

5.1 Larmore's normative conception of the self

In his book *The Practices of the Self*, Charles Larmore re-evaluates several of the premises that have been the core of multiple accounts of subjectivity throughout the history of philosophy. While discussing with a wide range of philosophers from both the "analytical" and the "continental" tradition, he draws significantly on the ideas of both Heidegger and Sartre.²³ Similarly to these two, and Levinas, Larmore wants to criticise the theories of the self which gives prevalence to perception and representation, both those which use these notions in order to argue for a special kind of self-knowledge ascribed to the subject and those which tries to eliminate the notion of the subject as an impossible object of perception.

²³ He does in fact also refer to Levinas once, in a footnote, claiming that "there is more than one point of convergence between Levinas's conception of the subject's responsibility as a kind of 'passivity' ... and the ideas I lay out in the following pages. This is not the place, however, to explain in what ways I feel close and also far from Levinas's thought" (Larmore 2010, 106).

Larmore's main thesis in this book is to defend the claim that there is a special relation that the subject maintains to itself, and that this relation is to be understood in terms of commitments and avowals rather than in terms of knowledge: "The intimate relationship we have to ourselves, which cannot be reproduced in our relationship with others, is of a completely different order [the relations of knowledge]. It is an essentially *practical* self-relation – or, more precisely, a *normative* one, insofar as committing ourselves signifies obligating ourselves to respect what the commitment gives us reason to do. ... [M]y goal is to bring out the fundamentally practical structure of the self and the different ways in which it comes to expression" (Larmore 2010, xiv).

As Larmore tries to explicate the essential self-relation that characterises the subject, he draws an important distinction between practical and cognitive reflection. Our faculty of cognitive reflection allows us to "discover what our existing knowledge implies, rather than taking another look at experience" (Ibid., 24). Such a reflection, pertaining to knowledge, concerns not only our knowledge of the world, but also our attempts to understand our own beliefs and desires and to compare different courses of action with each other given a certain goal. The aim of cognitive reflection, as Larmore thus understands it, is knowledge. Practical reflection, on the other hand, does not concern knowledge. Rather, it is our ability to "turn back upon ourselves ... in order to take an explicit stand, to devote ourselves to beliefs, feelings, or actions that may already be unreflectively ours or that we are now making our own for the first time" (Ibid., 24). It is important to notice that this distinction is parallel to Levinas' distinction between the theoretical and the practical in that the former entails objectification, while the latter does not. By Larmore's notion of practical self-reflection, the subject is not drawing a distinction between itself as reflecting and itself as the object of reflection. Such a distinction is problematic if we claim that it manifests the essential self-relation of the subject, and has been thoroughly discussed in the history of philosophy. Larmore's important contribution to this discussion is the claim that every attempt to describe the subject's essential self-relation in terms of self-knowledge, either leads to such a division or to an idea of intuitive self-knowledge.²⁴ Even though our self-relation through practical reflection comes

²⁴ Larmore does not explicitly put forth this claim, but having first discussed the problematic consequences of the divided self throughout his discussion on authenticity and on cognitive reflection (Larmore 2010, 88–90), he goes on to reject that self-knowledge may take any other form. It is important to notice that Larmore does not criticise cognitive reflection as such, or the value of cognitive self-reflection; he only claims that it cannot be the subject's essential self-relation. Both this latter point and the criticism of alternative forms of self-knowledge

closer to the essential self-relation of the subject than cognitive reflection does, the “practical-normative” self-relation Larmore is after is not itself a relation of reflection, as it is not only in the moments of reflection that we retain this self-relation. Practical self-reflection is an expression of a self-relation which too is practical in nature, but which is prior to reflection. Larmore claims that this essential self-relation is the way the human beings always “take a stand and commit ourselves to respecting their [the beliefs and desires we hold] implications” (Ibid., 136). Larmore’s aim in showing the limits of the cognitive reflection in general is intended to demonstrate how we fail to understand the way the subject is always already engaged in the world that it inhabits, if we do not adequately understand the notions of practical reflection and of practical pre-reflective self-relation. This engagement manifests itself in terms of commitments and avowals.

Having highlighted the aspects of Larmore’s theory that concern the topic of this essay, it is easy to spot the significant similarities with Levinas’ thought. The notion of practical self-reflection resembles both Levinas’ notion of psychism and Taylor’s notion of self-interpretation, as it was discussed earlier in this essay. The common trait is that they all seem to make the lived life, as it is accessible from the first-person perspective, available for philosophical discussion. Even though Levinas discusses it in terms of causes and conditions which the subject remains free to invert or adopt, Larmore in terms of commitments only the subject itself can engage in, and Taylor in terms of the essential role of self-interpretation for human subjects, they all defend the importance of the first-person perspective in understanding the structure of subjectivity. But one important difference quickly makes itself apparent, and that is the choice of vocabulary. Where Levinas uses what I have called a vitalistic and existentialistic vocabulary, Larmore chooses to discuss the topic in normative terms. While discussing Bergson and Sartre, Larmore explicitly criticises the vitalistic vocabulary, claiming that defending the importance of the first-person perspective does not entail a commitment to the vocabulary of lived life: “Bergson chose a vitalist vocabulary in laying out the fundamental nature of our relation to ourselves. It seems to me more

should be apparent from the following passage: “cognitive reflection on oneself is not condemned to miss its object, even if the self always appears then in terms of universal intelligibility and not the self that we alone have to be. But the fact is that observation and inference constitute the very motor of such an enterprise, as we attribute to ourselves beliefs and desires in order to make sense of what we have observed about ourselves. The illusion is to think that there can exist a kind of self-knowledge that takes place in a completely different fashion” (Larmore 2010, 123).

perspicuous to use to this end a 'normativist' vocabulary... It is not the concept of 'life' (or its siblings, like 'experience') that holds the key to our being, but rather such concepts as 'norm' and 'commitment'. We are wholly normative beings" (Ibid., 95). There is no doubt that Levinas is to be included in this criticism, and the question of whether Levinas' vocabulary stands in the way of his efforts to fully understand the subject is not unwarranted. But it should be noted that the part of Levinas' project which is presented in this essay, is the attempt to accentuate the singularity of the subject. And since his main thesis is that this singularity is produced by the subject's *living*, a vitalistic vocabulary does indeed seem to be in order. This vitalistic vocabulary is not without its merits. Levinas' vocabulary follows from his methodological commitment to commence with the analysis of experience. This commitment to experience was originally intended by Husserl to promote a philosophy free from presuppositions. But given the existentialistic premise that the human subject always already finds itself in the midst of the world it inhabits, Levinas is not aiming for a presuppositionless philosophy. Rather he is trying to present a philosophy that, even though it tries to account for the structure of our relation with ourselves, the world and the radical Other, never loses touch with the experiences that first motivated the investigation. Such an approach gives an important weight to the claims Levinas makes, as they, even though they are not analytical propositions, are not mere postulates either. Rather they rest on analyses of concrete experiences which others may repeat or evaluate the accuracy of. Larmore's critique of the vitalistic vocabulary thus seems to be a bit harsh, both because the vocabulary in question grounds the propositions of the theory in actual life – which is, in fact, the topic in question – and because it allows us to evaluate a broad range of experiences which might alter certain premises and strengthen others. Such is the role of Levinas' analyses of, for example, death agony and insomnia, which both highlight aspects of the subject's being, such as its vulnerability.

But as we shall see shortly, there is indeed something that seems to be lacking in Levinas' account, and that concerns normativity. It should be clear that the question of normativity and commitment never enters into the analysis of enjoyment, given that commitment is to be understood as an activity. The notion of enjoyment underlines both our general openness and vulnerability to the world and the way in which this relationship contributes to our identity. The fundamental passivity in our experience of the world examined through enjoyment does not rule out that the subject may relate to these experiences in different ways as it becomes aware of them, and that it through these ways of relating to experiences commits itself. There

is thus a sense of commitment in psychism. But what about the relation with the Other? How does Levinas' account for the normative content of this relation?

5.2 Analogy or revelation: The notion of the human Other

Throughout this essay I have tried to offer a coherent reading of how Levinas understands the subject as a singularity, a singularity which is produced as the personal identity of the self. But the importance ascribed to the subject seems to stand in tension with the common understanding of the structure of Levinas thought, exemplified by Michael Morgan, where “everything starts with the other person” (Morgan 2008, 259). This basic idea forms the core of the ethical reading of Levinas' philosophy, a reading which goes like this: It is the revelation of the singularity of the face of the Other that disturbs the subject and forces it to accept the reality of something which – or someone whose – meaning it cannot draw from itself; it stands in a relation with radical alterity. When we examined the relation to the element, it was clear that the subject stood in relation with something other than itself, to which it was delivered, but there is an important difference between the otherness of the elements and the alterity of the Other: the idea of responsibility (other than for oneself) does not enter into the relation with the elements. It is the revelation of the face of the Other that is seen as the source of our obligation and it is accessible to us through sensibility. The key thesis of this argument is that the human subject is not thrown into the world alone. As we saw in Heidegger's treatment of authenticity, even though he admitted that human existence was characterised by being-with, there was only a certain solitude that allowed the notion of authenticity and its adjacent sense of responsibility for oneself to take place on the centre stage. In Levinas' philosophy, the fact that the subject's being in the world is always already a social existence is fully acknowledged, allowing for a reorientation from the responsibility for oneself, to the responsibility for the Other. But what is the structure of this responsibility? How is normativity introduced to this relation? Morgan draws several conclusions on this structure by comparing Levinas with Christine Korsgaard, the following conclusions being the most important. First, our obligation is not grounded on any conceptualisations or on reflection which allows us to recognise the common human nature in us as obligating. Second, it is not only by the concrete pain or suffering expressed by the Other that this obligation arises; it is simply the Other's very existence that calls out to us. From these two

conclusions we recognise that it is not the generality of the Other – that we share a common rationality, for example – that is the source of our responsibility, but its singularity and vulnerability. The third conclusion is that this openness towards the Other through singularity is a feature of all social existence. And last, since it is prior to any conceptualisation, the Other need not be a human being; any creature can have a face. All that is required is that the creature can be in need and call out to us (Morgan 2008, 258). On the ground of these conclusions, I want to ask the following question: Is the account of the subject's relation to the face of the Other through revelation adequate?

The asymmetrical relation between the subject and the Other is one of the basic ideas of Levinas' philosophy. It is intended as a criticism of the theories of our social existence which make the assumption that any obligations between subjects are established on the common ground between them, be it relative (as the relative common human nature in Hume) or absolute (as in Kant's attempt to ground morality on reason). Levinas' claim is that it is asymmetry that constitutes the core of our relation with the human Other; an asymmetry that is retained in all relation where the radical alterity of the Other is accommodated for, by relating to the Other as an Other and not as a thing. One might wonder whether the relation is not actually symmetrical since it is a relation between singularities, but as Levinas is committed to the first-person perspective, there is still a structural asymmetry between the two singularities. But there is a tension in the way Levinas describes this relation. On the one hand it is described through terms of epiphany or revelation. The singularity of the Other is revealed to us; it is not the result of our reflection, but is given to us through the expression of the Other. The Other's identity is not bestowed upon him or her through our sense-bestowal, but is rather constituted through the Other's own activity and relative self-sufficiency. But this way of describing the alterity of the Other already leads us over to the other way the relation between the subject and the Other is to be understood. It seems apparent that the singularity of the Other and of the subject is produced in the same way, by virtue of the principles of identity. Thus, even though we relate to the expressions of the Other, these expressions are to be understood as expressions of singularity, much in the same way as the subject is according to it being an incorporation of an irreducible first-person perspective and through its ability to interpret and justify itself and its actions. Thus, we may ask ourselves: How do we recognise the Other's expressions as expressions? How do we recognise the singularity these expressions are expressions of?

The question which is to be settled is whether the singularity of the Other is fully revealed to us through the expressions of the Other, or if we still need some analogy from the singularity of the subject. The idea that the singularity of the Other is revealed to us is described multiple times throughout *Totality and Infinity*: “Manifestation καθ’ αὐτό [in respect of itself] consists in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*. ... *The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other [Autrui], the manifestation of a face over and beyond form” (TI, 65–66/60–61). This manifestation as revelation is grounded on the radical exteriority of the Other, as it becomes apparent when Levinas discusses the Other’s will: “The Other’s designs do not present themselves to me as do the laws of things. ... The will that refuses the foreign will is obliged to recognise this foreign will as absolutely exterior, as untranslatable into thoughts that would be immanent in itself. Whatever be the extension of my thoughts, limited by nothing, the Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable – he is infinite and recognized as such” (TI, 230/255–256). The essence of the claim that the singularity of the Other is revealed, is that the Other expresses itself, in this example through its will, and that these expressions cannot derive their sense from the subject itself. A final passage will illuminate the nature of this expression: “This way of undoing the form adequate to the Same so as to present oneself as other is to signify or to have a meaning. To present oneself by signifying is to speak. ... Signification or expression thus contrasts with every intuitive datum precisely because to signify is not to give... It is preeminently the presence of exteriority. Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), but an original relation with exterior being. ... It is the production of meaning... it is said and taught by presence” (TI, 66/61–62). The Other is thus revealed to us through its expressions. Levinas draws a distinction between actions and works on the one hand and expressions on the Other, the difference being that the former only refer indirectly to the author, while expression or discourse do so directly. Granting that one may consider language to be an act as well, he claims that the essence of language is “the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face” (TI, 67/62).

If what distinguishes the Other from works, actions, art, and non-living things, is that the Other expresses itself in a particular way by being present with its expression, we may again ask ourselves what Levinas means by this presence. This is never specified in the book, but in so far as we are speaking of the human Other, as Levinas most often seems to do, this

presence comes close to what Levinas describes as the singularity of the subject. On the one hand, it is the irreducible first-person perspective which allows a subject “to speak for himself or herself”; it is the ability to interpret or adopt the circumstances and conditions of one’s life; it is psychism. On the other hand, the expressions of singularity are often described throughout Levinas’ writings in terms of the Other’s vulnerability and suffering. These descriptions seem to be grounded on the analyses of the human subject as always being located within a shared world to which it is delivered. This comes close to the analyses of the subject’s enjoyment earlier in this essay. These analyses were intended to expose amongst other things, the vulnerability of the subject. It is thus something about the human existence, our being in the world, which grounds the vulnerability that is expressed through the face of the Other. And this vulnerability is exposed through the analyses of the subject, not of the radical Other. Thus, we seem to find ourselves in the position where the revelation of the Other is based on certain common traits between the subject and the Other, as it is only by having analysed the singularity of the subject that we are in a position to *recognise* the expression of the Other as expressions of singularity. It is only in so far as we have exposed and accepted certain proposition concerning the way the subject relates to itself and the world, that we can recognise the expressions of the Other as different from, not only objects such as trees and stones, but also works of human labour. This difference remains even as these latter works are often deemed to be endowed with an expression, such as for example artworks, dwellings or all other things that have been manipulated by human labour. Thus, the notion of the singularity of the Other seems to be derived by analogy from the notion of the singularity of the subject. That is to say, we do not bestow the singularity on the Other. This singularity is still produced through expression and living, and it still necessitates an irreducible first-person perspective. But it is only in so far as we accepted the notion of singularity as it was exposed through the analysis of the subject that we may adequately accommodate for the singularity of the Other. The *possibility* for singularity is not itself revealed through the Other’s expression since we may constantly fail to understand it as such, namely as an expression of singularity.

This leads us to the final question posed by Charles Larmore, concerning the question of normativity. Is it the case that Levinas’ vitalistic vocabulary hides something important about the structure of subjectivity? The nature and status of the face of the Other is a controversial issue in Levinas’ philosophy which has not been settled, but given that, for example, the face of the Other expresses vulnerability, in what way does this demand a reaction or a certain behaviour from the subject that encounters it? What is the normative ground when Levinas

claims that the encounter with the face is a moral summon?: “The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons. This movement proceeds from the other” (TI, 196/213). As we saw with the question of singularity, even though the singularity is produced by the being itself, we have to recognise it on the ground of our own singularity. If this is the case, it might be the case that the presence of the Other ushers responsibility, but it gives us no reason to accept this responsibility. Levinas’ solution to this problem is to claim that this responsibility is irreducible from our existence as human beings as it is grounded in our social existence. But then it is only in so far as we interpret this existence appropriately that we are in any position to recognise the responsibility in question. The conclusion seems to be inescapable, but the confusion seems to stem from the essential difference in the principles of identity Levinas’ offers. On the one hand he understands the subject to be a – to use Taylor’s term – self-interpreting animal which has the spontaneity to relate to the conditions of its own life. On the other hand the subject is also a being that is fundamentally passive, which is affected by its surroundings that it always has to relate to, actively or passively. In Levinas’ philosophy the human subject is both described as a being who actively relates to its surroundings and bestows importance and meaning on them, and as a being who finds itself located in a world which is always already meaningful.

In his criticism of authenticity, Levinas not only tried to replace the vocabulary and pathos of the existentialistic tradition, but he also tried to change the perspective from the self to the Other. But from the twofold description of the human subject, it might seem that his disregard for the notion of authenticity was too categorical. Levinas’ claims about the realism of values only seem to have an existential importance if the subject commits itself to the values – or the meaningful world – it encounters. We may choose to disregard the suffering and pleas, and an indication towards our social existence will only make an impact given that the subject appropriately *commits itself* to holding those beliefs and desires that entail that suffering is wrong and that giving aid is right.

The tension described in the subject’s relation to the Other stems from Levinas’ methodological commitments which he assumes from the phenomenological tradition where his examination takes the self as the point of departure. Thus, the question of the Other is introduced as the question of how the subject relates to alterity without undermining this alterity. By describing the experienced asymmetry of this relation and the way the Other reveals itself to us rather than being revealed or constructed by us, Levinas only describes

how the Other appears to the subject. Thus it is never a question of how the Other appears outside of this relation, for example in relation to the world, as Levinas analysed the different relations of the subject. Nor is it a question of how the Other relates to the Same, from the Other's perspective, as this again would violate the alterity of the Other and the authority of the first-person perspective. But even though Levinas describes how the Other appears as a singularity by being present with its expressions, Levinas never describes the commitment required on the side of the subject in order for it to recognise these expressions as expressions of singularity. These commitments seem to be based on an analogy from the nature of the singularity of the subject to the singularity of the Other as the ground for this presence is the same as the way the subject itself is present to its own expressions.

Where does this leave us? In the beginning of this chapter I claimed that the analysis would be done against the spirit of Levinas' writings. This analysis directs Levinas' thought into an argument he would reject. The reason for this is that Levinas would claim that any attempt to explain the singularity of the Other by taking a detour through the idea of the subject would be to reduce the alterity of the Other to the interiority of the Same. The extraordinary notion of the Other, Levinas would claim, is not simply characterized by singularity, but by radical alterity. Levinas' language of revelation was precisely intended to avoid the reduction of this alterity to the Same, or to put it otherwise, to avoid understanding the Other in terms of the subject. The crucial point in Levinas' ethical thought is not how the subject accommodates the Other and convinces itself of its responsibility, but rather how it is only by virtue of the meeting with the radical alterity of the Other – its singularity – that the question of morality rises at all. And this meeting, Levinas would claim, is irreducible from the human existence. Any attempt to understand this meeting with the radical Other will take recourse in the interiority of the Same, usually by claiming that this meeting must be related to a corresponding faculty in the subject. That is in fact the nature of my argument in this chapter, but the questions that motivated this arguments arose from Levinas' descriptions of the singularity of the Other and of its expressions, and as long as we pose these questions – even if Levinas would consider them to be inadequate – the tension of Levinas' position remains.

6 Conclusions

In this essay, my most fundamental move has been to shift the attention from the singularity of the Other to the singularity of the self. The motivation for this move was first and foremost the feeling that most accounts of Levinas' philosophy underplayed the central role of this singularity, by rather discussing the singularity of the Other. I have guided my reading of *Totality and Infinity* by the two methodological commitments Levinas makes in the preface, which were examined in chapter 2. Throughout the essay I have argued that Levinas offers several principles of identity which are connected to the different relations the subject engages in and which constitute the ground for this singularity. In chapter 3 we saw how this identity was produced in psychism – or the subject's self-relation – through the temporal activity of the subject. This was then compared to Charles Taylor's idea of the human subject as a self-interpreting animal, which allowed me to claim that Levinas' terminology of "adoption" and "inversion" were intended to show how the human subject is essentially self-interpreting. In chapter 4, this identity in psychism was then showed to be grounded on the second major principle of identity, which was to be found in the subject's world-relation, namely the identity in enjoyment. Throughout this essay, I have claimed that Levinas defends a notion of a self which I defined as "minimally existentialistic", and which Levinas describes in vitalistic terms. This definition of the Levinasian self allowed us to appreciate how close Levinas often comes to the existentialistic tradition, even though he also offers pressing criticism of this tradition. Finally, in chapter 5 I evaluated the merits and limits of the vitalistic vocabulary, considering whether Levinas was able to defend all his claims – particularly the moral claims about the status of the Other – by virtue of this vocabulary. The limitation of this vocabulary became apparent in that the notion of the singularity of the Other, in order to have normative power, rested on the possibility of this singularity achieved through the analysis of the singularity of the subject. This again presupposed that the subject adopted certain commitments, something which could not be described by virtue of the vitalistic terms. The dilemma Levinas ends up with stems from both his methodological commitment to commence his analysis by concrete experience and from his synthesis of the activity and passivity of the subject.

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